THE BIG 160 PAGE MAGAZINE

FEBRUARY

15¢

# STAR WESTERN

WALT COBURN'S
*DRAMATIC MONTANA NOVELETTE*
TINHORNS CAN'T CHEAT DEATH

OLMSTED · PEARSOL
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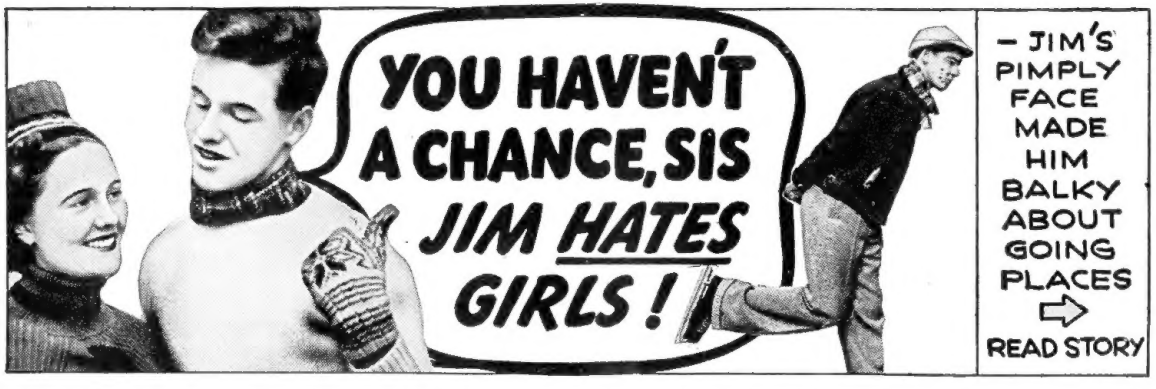
BREED OF THE STORM FRONTIER
*GRIPPING FEATURE-LENGTH NOVEL*
*by* CLIFF FARRELL

FEB. STAR WESTERN MAGAZINE 160 PAGES 15¢



THAT GUY'S A REGULAR HERMIT I TELL YOU – JUST STICKS AROUND BY HIMSELF – WOULDN'T TAKE A GIRL OUT ON A BET...
IS THAT SO – WELL I'LL BET I CAN BREAK HIM DOWN. YOU WATCH-

NOT HURT ARE YOU – HERE- YOU'D BETTER LET ME HELP YOU OVER TO THE BANK
OOOH – OUCH – MERCY, I JUST C-CAN'T SEEM TO S-STAND UP ON THESE SKATES

THANKS SO MUCH – YOU'RE JIM GREENE AREN'T YOU? I'VE HEARD MY BROTHER BOB TALK ABOUT YOU LOTS. WHY DON'T YOU EVER COME OVER WITH THE REST OF THE CROWD?
OH – I – ER I COULDN'T – THAT IS YOU SEE – I'M – ER – I'M NO GO AT SOCIAL STUFF

WELL, WELL, MISS CLEOPATRA, DIDN'T GET FAR THAT TIME – DID YOU?
H'MM – BOB, I BET I KNOW WHY HE ACTS STAND-OFFISH. IT'S HIS FACE. ALL THOSE PIMPLES. WHY DON'T YOU TELL HIM ABOUT FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST? YOU KNOW HOW IT HELPED YOU!

LATER
HERE – TRY THIS ONE!
WHO SAID JIM DOESN'T LIKE GIRLS?
O.K. SIS – I'LL EAT MY WORDS. YOU AND THOSE YEAST CAKES SURE HAVE WORKED WONDERS. JIM'S A NEW GUY SINCE THOSE PIMPLES LEFT HIM!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VOLUME ELEVEN | FEBRUARY, 1937 | NUMBER ONE

## ★ Star Novel ★

**BREED OF THE STORM FRONTIER**.....**By Cliff Farrell** 10
*Out of that night of storm Jay Tallant came, a frontier outcast, with guns to erase his cattle-king father's hatred—and return to their rightful heritage the two hard-pressed rangeland friends who sided him in his hour of bitterest need!*

## ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Star Novelettes ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

**THE LOST GUNMAN**.....**By Stone Cody** 50
*A nameless derelict rode the twisting midnight gun-trail. . . . For out of his darkling past rose a boothill debt and a lonely girl whose hope for salvation lay in a dead man's return!*

**TINHORNS CAN'T CHEAT DEATH!**.....**By Walt Coburn** 70
*All the slim-fingered magic and steel-cold nerve at Duce High Fox's command could avail him little when he had to play his last grim hand against Eternity—and play it straight!*

**A FEUDIST COMES HOME TO DIE**.....**By Harry F. Olmsted** 88
*The last hope of his fighting clan, Steve Woodruff took up a dead man's guns and a dead man's hate—for the spread which had condemned his kin to powdersmoke perdition!*

**LAWIN' IS PLAIN HELL!**.....**By Robert E. Mahaffay** 114
*With the badge of a murdered lawman as his only shield, could Wick Billings' rawhide heritage count against a hang-mob—and face the hate of the girl he had sworn to protect?*

**HIS GUARDIAN—THE KILLER!**.....**By George H. Michener** 134
*A slick boothill play awaited little Lem Stewart, outlaw gun-master. But Lem was playing out a game of his own—staking his life and skill for the son he swore never to see.*

## ★ ★ Star Short Stories ★ ★

**MIRACLE IN GUNSMOKE**.....**By John G. Pearsol** 40
*His neighbors trusted Cole Randall. He alone knew he was leading them to ruin and desolation—unless he could save them by a last-chance gunsmoke miracle!*

**WHILE THE HANGNOOSE WAITS**.....**By Buck Gilmore** 105
*A hangnoose for the man he hated—or the heart of the wildling queen he loved? Pliny Cole condemned himself to hell when he vowed to accomplish both!*

## ★ ★ ★ Star Features ★ ★ ★

**TAMERS OF THE WILDERNESS**.....**The Editor** 4
*Once a rebel heart flaunted a father's ire, at the frontier call. . . . It could happen again.*

**WHEN DEATH HELD THE REINS**.....**The Maverick** 8
*In bitterness, in broken pride, old Bill O'Neil baited his own stage-line trap!*

**UP THE TRAIL**.....**A Department** 148

**Cover Painting by Norm Saunders**

**Story Illustrations by George Wert, Hamilton Greene and John Meola**

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# HOW A FREE LESSON STARTED BILL ON THE WAY TO A GOOD RADIO JOB

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BUCK UP, BILL, WHY NOT TRY AN INDUSTRY THAT'S GROWING -- WHERE THERE'S MORE OPPORTUNITY

MARY'S RIGHT -- I'M NOT GETTING ANYWHERE. I OUGHT TO TRY A NEW FIELD TO MAKE MORE MONEY
LOOK AT THIS - RADIO IS CERTAINLY GROWING FAST -- AND THE NATIONAL RADIO INSTITUTE SAYS THEY TRAIN MEN FOR RADIO RIGHT AT HOME IN SPARE TIME
I DON'T THINK I COULD LEARN RADIO THAT WAY -- BUT THEY'LL SEND ME A SAMPLE LESSON FREE. GUESS I'LL MAIL THE COUPON AND LOOK INTO THIS

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute

## *Yes, I will send my First Lesson FREE to show how easy it is to TRAIN AT HOME FOR A GOOD RADIO JOB*

Do you want to make more money? I'm so sure that I can train you at home in your spare time for a good Radio Job that I'll send you a sample lesson absolutely FREE. Examine it, read it, see for yourself how easy it is to understand even if you've never had any technical experience or training.

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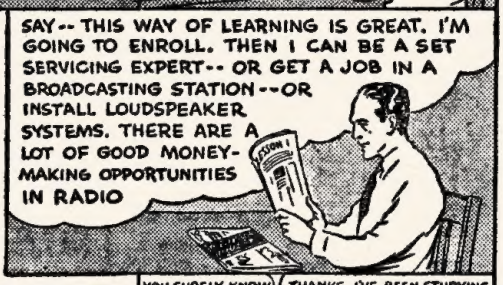
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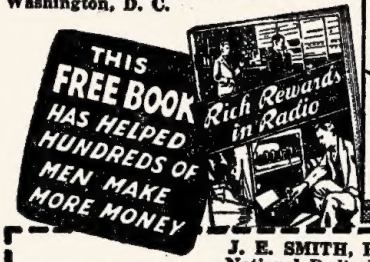
SO AM I. I'M MAKING GOOD MONEY NOW AND WE HAVE A BRIGHT FUTURE AHEAD IN RADIO

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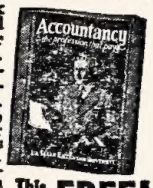


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# TAMERS OF THE WILDERNESS

OLD GABE FLAGG had done pretty well with his soldiers' land allotment in the rich, rolling upstate acres. He had fought for that land; and at last his perseverance and good judgment were bearing fruit. But now, with his feeling of satisfaction, came angry uneasiness. It was occasioned by his son, Jubal, a lank, gawky youngster of eighteen, with a jaw which bespoke an iron will.

"I'm leavin' for the Ohio," announced Jubal. "Gov'ment's offerin' good bottomland to folks who want to take it up an' work it. It's new country; I'll have a chance to develop it."

"Your duty an' your own land is right here," protested old Gabe. "If you go, don't never come back to this farm."

The muscles about Jubal's lean jaw tightened. "I want my own land; want my own start. This here is all right, but I don't feel like it's mine. So long, Pop."

Jubal, with his own hard-earned money, bought a creaky old Conestoga wagon and two span of mules. He took his personal belongings and started wheeling down the heavy-rutted road that led toward the West.

In the new country, Jubal Flagg pitted iron purpose and strength against the wilderness of the Ohio. His little farm grew from a small clearing to almost as many acres as he had left behind him, years ago. Jubal had married, and he was thinking with satisfaction that his son, Ben, had the same knack with things of the earth that he himself had. A good man to leave the farm to, Jubal decided. . . .

But Ben Flagg had other ideas. Excitement swept the breadth of the country like wind-driven flames of a prairie fire. A mill-hand in far-off California had come upon what seemed a river of gold. And now adventurous men were piling their families into wagons, setting out for that uncharted land where the rivers ran bright with precious metal.

They stood face to face, Ben and Jubal Flagg, and if there was a steely glint under the bushy gray brows of the father, that same determination shone from the blue eyes of the youngster.

Jubal Flagg swore in his cracked old

*(Concluded on page 6)*

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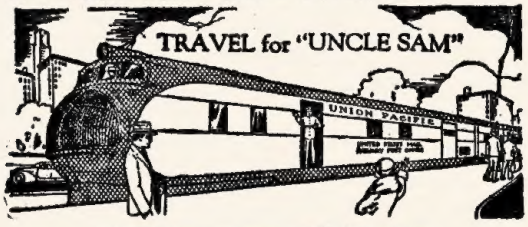


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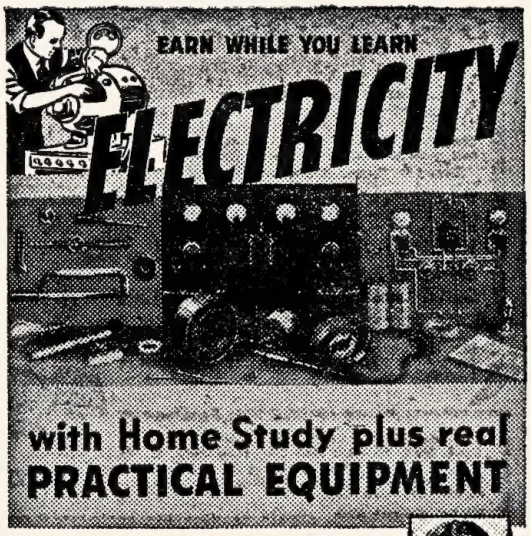

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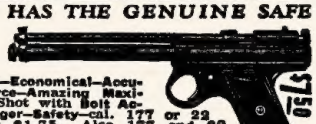

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When the genito-urinary passages become inflamed, you may suffer from a burning sensation. Your sleep is broken. Backaches, pains and stiffness trouble you.

Santalwood oil is known the world over, for the help it brings to these inflamed passages. It relieves. It soothes. It cleanses. If you want to get the real East Indian santalwood oil in easy-to-take capsules, get SANTAL MIDY from your druggist. SANTAL MIDY is the most famous santalwood oil preparation.

Don't take cheap remedies for your kidneys and bladder. SANTAL MIDY capsules are what you want because they bring results.



## TAMERS OF THE WILDERNESS

*(Continued from page 4)*

voice. "I built up this farm from nothing. I was fightin' for you, Ben, and them that'll come after you. An' now you want to go off on a fool's errand. Gold minin' ain't in our blood. And if you leave now, you leave forever!"

"I'm strong enough to make my own way," said Ben quietly. "I *got* to go—but I guess you never felt like I do, so I can't make you understand. I'm leavin' with a wagon train tomorrow. . . ."

There was a stony look in Jubal's eyes when he saw his son's back diminish in the early dusk, and on into the afterglow of the sunset. . . .

Perhaps it was Ben Flagg's nature that he never did reach that golden promise for which he set out. Perhaps old Jubal had been right, when he had said that gold-hunting never did run in the Flagg blood. Ben Flagg married a girl of that outfit, left the wagon train, and drifted southward.

How they escaped the Indians, no one will ever know. But they lived to reach what is now Oklahoma. Ben Flagg and the girl once more faced hardship, flung their own strength and courage and fighting spirit against the most primitive and hostile of all the frontiers—because Ben couldn't leave some fine-looking grazing land. And they won out.

Won? Well, Ben always thought he had. He never did get to be a rich man; he never did get to have very many cattle, nor even did his little ranch cover much more ground than his father's vast farm back East. But he did bring to that wild country the same spirit and the same ruggedness and independence which had once conquered a wilderness for his father. And when his father died, and he had the chance to go back to a rich, well-paying farmland, he laughed.

"Me, I reckon I'm just cut out to fight for what I can claim myself," he said. "Sis needs that farm more than I do—an' I ain't a farmer, anyhow. Cows is my livin'—an' my life. If my son wants to go on to hunt some place of his own—why he can go, just like I did. Reckon us Flaggs is all huntin' new lands to tame; we'll trade an easy livin' for an off-chance to make our own, in our own way."

—THE EDITORS

# Train at Home ... Under Factory Engineers for GOOD PAY Spare-Time and Full-Time Jobs in RADIO

**APPOINTED BY RADIO MANUFACTURERS TO SUPERVISE R-T-I TRAINING**

This is the R-T-I Advisory Board —Engineers and Executives of large Radio firms—appointed by these firms to supervise and direct R-T-I Training. Put your future in their hands. 50 great radio manufacturers now endorse this Training.

## LEARN TO EARN UP TO $75 A WEEK

**(MANY R-T-I TRAINED MEN EARN MORE)**

**MAIL COUPON BELOW**

**RAY D. SMITH**
**President R-T-I, who has directed training of 100,000 men. Read what a few students say.**

"Made my first spare time money after finishing four lessons. Over $500 spare time money in 10 months. R-T-I is O.K."
Delmer Grote, Route 5, Greenville, Ohio

* * *

"I made $14.25 in first 11 days of my training following your instructions."
C. E. Head, 431 Third St., Alexandria, La.

* * *

"Before finishing my training I was made Manager of a Department Store's radio section."
Howard N. Lentz, 123 W. Alexander St., Buchanan, Mich.

* * *

"My job paid me $18 a week before taking your training. Shortly after starting was averaging $60 a week. Have made as high as $250 in single week."
Wm. T. Ridd, 3452 Evelyn St., Verdun, P.Q., Canada

### Trained Men Needed in All Branches

If you're dissatisfied with small pay—lay-offs and an uncertain future—here's an opportunity that's too good to miss. At the cost of only the time it takes you to mail the coupon, you can get my big FREE book, "RADIO'S FUTURE AND YOUR OPPORTUNITY." This book tells how you can learn at home under the supervision of factory engineers, to make more money almost at once in Radio—whether you want to make Radio your life's work, or use it to pick up an extra $5 to $20 a week in your spare time.

### More Opportunities Than Ever Before

Radio is still forging ahead. 1936 beats all other years. Over 6 million new sets sold. Over 30 million dollars paid for service alone this year. Where only a few hundred men were employed a short time ago, thousands are employed today. And where a hundred jobs paid up to $75 a week—there are thousands of such jobs today—many paying even more. And new jobs are being created all the time—full time jobs and spare time jobs. Get my book and see how easy it is to learn at home for this good-pay work.

### "Shop Training" for the Home

R-T-I Training is different than any training you ever heard about. It comes to you right from the heart of the Radio Industry—right out of the factories where Radio sets and other vacuum-tube devices are made. It was planned and prepared and is supervised by big radio engineers IN these factories—by men appointed for the purpose. This means that trained the R-T-I way, you'll be trained as the Radio Industry wants you trained—just as the Radio Industry, itself, would train you if it was doing the job.

### Television, Photo Electric Cells Public Address Systems Included

Radio service work is only the starting point in R-T-I Training. From there it will take you through the whole field of Radio and Electronics. You will learn about every new development, including Television so you'll be ready when Television breaks. You'll also learn the big money subjects such as Aviation and Auto Radio; Public Address Systems; how to handle Photo Cells; Sound Picture Recording, Etc.

### 4 Working Outfits Furnished

Start almost at once doing part time radio work. I furnish 4 outfits of apparatus that you build into test equipment with which you can do actual jobs and earn extra money. My Training pays its own way and you get your money back if not satisfied.

### Age or Lack of Experience No Handicap

You don't have to be a high school graduate, nor even have finished the grades. My Training is so simple, easy, and practical, that the average man, regardless of age, education, or previous experience can master it. It offers the chance you have wanted to get out of a small-pay, no-future job, into good pay work with a future, in Radio and all its branches.

### Get My Free Book

INVESTIGATE! Learn why R-T-I Training is different. Find out why R-T-I Trained men get "Quick Results" and "Big Results." Send for your copy of "Radio's Future and Your Opportunity" today. It tells you about Radio's amazing opportunities. It describes my approved training. It tells what R.T.I students are doing and making. It gives the names of my Advisory Board and 50 endorsing manufacturers. It's FREE. Clip, sign and mail coupon RIGHT NOW!

**RAY D. SMITH, President**

**RADIO AND TELEVISION INSTITUTE**
PRACTICAL SHOP TRAINING FOR THE HOME

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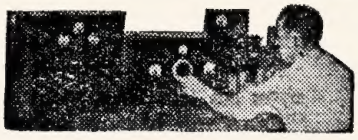
W. H. Carr, 402 N. 16th St., Kansas City, Kansas, an R.T.I. student, has charge of 35 radio equipped cars for the Kansas City Police and Fire Departments. His salary is $230.00 a month and he is furnished with an automobile, gas, oil, etc. He says, "If I had not taken your course I would not be able to hold this job."



### Makes $600 in One Month

Herbert B. Thomson, Gorman, Texas, formerly an oil well driller, borrowed $170.00 to start a spare time radio business after completing 12 R-T-I lessons. He made money from the start. In two years his shop was worth $3500. He says, "Because of my R-T-I Training I made $450 in September and over $600 in October, 1935. It pays to be R-T-I Trained."

## MAIL FOR FREE BOOK

**Ray D. Smith, President,**
**RADIO AND TELEVISION INSTITUTE (R-T-I),**
**2150 Lawrence Ave., Dept. 252,**
**Chicago, Ill.**

Without obligation, send me a copy of "Radio's Future and Your Opportunity." I am interested in your training and the opportunities in the great field of Radio for the R-T-I Trained Men.

Name.....

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City.....State.....

# WHEN DEATH HELD THE REINS

BILLY O'NEIL was alternately praised as the most skilful and daring stage driver on the Pacific slope, and damned as the most lucky, reckless, drunken fool who ever discarded a brake in a down-grade drive. He could toss off a full quart of brandy, climb onto the box, cut seven minutes from the perilous run between Dutch Flat and Chino Bar, and turn his six-horse, sweating team, loose-reined, before the Nugget House—then stop within an inch of the mark he had whittled on the wooden awning support. And then he'd have to be carried inside, to replenish himself with another full bottle.

The pride of Satan; the capacity for absolute judgment of distance and speed, the nerve of the damned—all those were second nature to Billy O'Neil. Dressed in yellow breeches, a red waistcoat, a black California hat, and with a whip in his hand, he was ready to drive. The ultimate destination might be either Dutch Flat or hell, but he'd get through without a scratch, and give the passengers the fright of their lives, in the bargain.

A gold strike near Chino Bar brought prosperity and a stampede. It brought more business for the Occidental stage line. It also brought pilgrims, of wealth and influence. Frisco Charley, owner of the Occidental line, sold out, went out to the diggings and stayed there. The new owner, no native son of the gold frontier, had his own ideas of transportation, and those were not Billy O'Neil's.

Full to the guards, Billy O'Neil one day swaggered from the Bella Union, bound to have a showdown with the new owner, whom he'd never met, but whose comments on Billy's methods of driving had reached him. The new owner could not be found. Grumbling, Billy had another libation, was helped to the box, and instantly became steady, with his skill at the reins unimpaired. Swearing that the new owner was afraid to meet him, Billy O'Neil climbed down at the other end of his run—at the Nugget House—and made tracks for his customary bottle. But with it, this time, he found an envelope.

Frowning, the white-haired hell-driver ripped it open, tried to focus his eyes on the fine Spencerian lines of writing. He passed it to the barman. "Read the blame thing for me, Jimmy," he demanded.

The message was brief and to the point. It said that, owing to "unforeseen contingencies"—"The damn fool can't even write English!" Billy O'Neil swore—Billy O'Neil would finish his last trip as driver for the Occidental Company that week. And that was all.

No one could have had more pride in his work than did Billy O'Neil, champion stage driver of the gold frontier. He thought of the years that he had brought down the time between Chino Bar and Dutch Flat. He thought of the times he had snaked the stage through roaring, swollen rivers, and, faced by impassable roads, picked his way through the rocks and brush of valley and mountainside. Yet never had he been late; never had there been word of complaint. It had been his job—and a job in which he took an artist's pride—to get the stage through.

Frisco Charley would understand. But Frisco was no longer his boss. His boss remained a myth, a heartless man of money who couldn't ever hope to learn the fine points of handling six wild fuzztails along those roads.

That night Billy lay over. He was not at his accustomed haunts, telling tall ones to an appreciative audience. He was around, picking up information. He found that his last trip back to Dutch Flat would include fifteen thousand dollars in dust and nuggets. Armed with that information, he sauntered down to Tent-town just below Chino Bar.

Late that night, he was in council in the back room of Tent-town's biggest saloon. With him, conversing in earnest whispers, were four men whose names even then were on Wells Fargo's wanted list. It was nearly dawn when Billy O'Neil returned, to sit, staring vacantly into space until the hostler brought around the horses and coach.

Just before he left, the proprietor of the Nugget House jerked his head toward one of the passengers, a thick-set individual with a certain air of authority about him.

"I got a hunch that that's the new driver, Billy," he said.

Billy O'Neil snorted as he saw the man climb up top. And Billy felt the man's eyes on his back as he took up the ribbons and cracked the whip. He'd show this new man how to drive, he swore to himself. That was, up to a certain point. . . .

And drive he did. Careening around the turns, billowing up dust behind, he laid leather into the straining backs of wheelers, swing and leaders. Afterward men swore that at no time during that ride were more than two wheels on the road simultaneously. It was just when he was getting up speed to take the hill after Hangman's Ford when he heard other rumbling wheels and thudding hoofs behind. But a bend cut off the view back there.

Not even his horses could take that steep grade at a run. They slowed down, panting and sweat-streaked. And then two things happened at once. From the brush-covered side of the road, four masked men emerged, holding rifles.

"Whoa!" one called. "Stick up your hands, Billy."

But Billy wasn't paying attention. For, from the corner of his eye, he had caught sight of the other vehicle. And his lean jaw tightened.

It was a sight which made him forget even the advent of the robbers—which, of course, he'd been expecting. A newly painted Concord, handsome in its red and gold trim, was coming hell-bent behind him. The six horses were beautifully matched; the driver handsome in his buckskin uniform. He caught a name on the pennon—the Miners' Mail and Express Company.

Another stage line—on his route! Another outfit having the almighty nerve to think that they could stand in competition with Billy O'Neil! Billy never hesitated. Forgotten now were the bandits; forgotten now was his injured pride and his hate for his greenhorn boss and for the new driver behind him. With a yell which was heard above the blasting of those renegade guns, above the shrill blare of a horn from the coach behind, Billy O'Neil stood in the box and gave the ponies his own brand of hell.

It was enough—enough, somehow, to make them gather their tired muscles to new effort, and enough, so sudden it was, to make the bandits' guns miss their human targets. The old coach lunged ahead. And Billy O'Neil, with sweat glistening on his red face, cursed and prayed with each lash of the whip, as the shotgun guard beside him blasted at the astonished outlaws.

That ride went down in history. And so did the arrival of the bullet-bitten coach as it pulled up, true to its mark, before the Bella Union. The thick-set stranger leaped down first. Billy O'Neil was a split second behind him. They were together at the bar, half through with their first bottle, when the rival stage hauled in, its strongbox looted of treasure.

"A damn fine ride, Billy!" said the man he thought of as the new driver. "Guess you'll be driving for this company as long as you want."

"Like hell!" snorted Billy O'Neil. "As soon as I find that white-livered son who owns this outfit, I'll tell him off. Then I'm quittin'."

"You're talkin' to him right now," grinned the man. "I own this outfit and the bank an' a good slice of the mines hereabouts. I'd heard of you—how you was hell on the leathers, an' with the coming of a competitive stage line, I thought mebby we ought to have a man who was more cautious. That was a mistake—a bad one. . . ."

Billy O'Neil squinted at his empty glass. "Yore apology's accepted," he said grandly. "Any time you want to learn how to run a stage line, you'll find me here, or on the box. Let's drink on it."

They did.

—THE MAVERICK

# Breed of the

**By Cliff Farrell**
*(Author of "Guns for a Neighbor," etc.)*

**Out of that night of storm Jay Tallant came, a frontier outcast, to the grim range-king father who had long since erased his memory in years of hatred. Could he bring to that war-torn range a measure of peace which he so longed for . . . and return to their rightful heritage the two hard-pressed rangeland friends who sided him in his hour of bitterest need?**

MOANING down from the snow-bound peaks to the west, the raw wind prowled like an unleashed beast of prey across the high sage plain. Range cattle took cover in the coulées and breaks along the frozen Thundercloud River, or drifted away before the on-coming blizzard.

The bitter wind, sending up small whirl-pools of gritty snow dancing madly across the rustling sage, drowned out the noise of the rusty locomotive and its score of

# Breed of the Storm Frontier

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The bitter wind, sending up small whirl-pools of gritty snow dancing madly across the rustling sage, drowned out the noise of the rusty locomotive and its score of empty freight and stock cars. The engine puffed to a stop at the Antelope Springs water tank out in the open plain. The fireman braced himself against the biting wind as he swung the long spout.

Two burly brakemen, eyes red and smarting in the cold, came running up from the caboose and jerked open the door of a box car. One had a bulldog-nosed gun in his hand, and the other was armed with a hickory brake stick.

"Come outta there, bo," one bawled. "Hit the grit! End o' the line for you."

The lone occupant of the empty car unrolled from a dusty old soogan. He looked at the gun in the brakie's mittened fist, and a little scornful quirk appeared on his square, stubble-covered face.

"We been watchin' yuh ever since yuh swung on at Bowie Junction," one of the shacks growled. Then he invited, "Try boardin' us ag'in, if yuh want your skull cracked."

The sandy-haired drifter shrugged. He alighted on the frozen gravel, turning up the collar of his frayed old mackinaw.

# Storm Frontier

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The shacks glared at him, then returned to the caboose where the stove glowed cherry red. They kept an eye on the lonely figure out there by the ice-fringed water tank.

"Cowboy by his looks," one remarked. "That's why I put him off the drag. I ain't forgot that bunch of cowpokes that throwed you an' me off our own train a couple weeks ago, Ed."

"Nor me," the other shack spat. "I was hopin' this one would put up a fight. I'd enjoy bendin' a brake club over the head of one of them damn high-heeled sons. I hate the breed. He wasn't with that outfit that hoorawed us, but they're all alike. They deal misery tuh railroad men."

"Fer a minute I had a hunch he was goin' tuh hackle an' bite back," the other shrugged. "Did yuh notice his eyes? Gray an' cold as that sky up there. Sorta give me a queer kind of a chill."

"His eyes will be a damned sight colder an' grayer before long," the other scoffed. "That's a blizzard sky. Inside another hour that drifter is goin' tuh wish he had never been born."

"He'll wait at the tank for another train," the other chuckled grimly. "He don't know that there ain't no more on this jerk-line until mornin'. By that time I reckon he won't be no more'n an icicle."

The wind knifed through Jay Tallant's thin, old mackinaw. He moved to the lee of the water tank and watched the train pull out.

He saw the faces of the brakemen against the frosted windows of the caboose, grinning jeeringly. The freckled, stubby fingers of the red-whiskered derelict slid impetuously to the six-shooter that was holstered beneath the skirt of his mackinaw. Then he shrugged and released the gun, ramming his chilled hands deep in his pockets again.

"No more," he muttered harshly. "No more killin'. Never again!"

The habitual look of fixed indifference settled again on the blunt, rugged features beneath the film of red beard. His attitude was lax and remote even as he grew aware of the increasing drive of the wind.

RANGE-BORN, weather-wise, this drifter knew well that a blizzard was coming. He looked around, wondering just where he was. He had boarded this freight at Bowie Junction on the main line about daybreak, expecting to awaken somewhere near Julesburg in Colorado by dusk.

He was heading south. To Texas maybe, perhaps to Mexico, or even South America. It didn't matter to him how far he went or where he stopped. Only that he kept moving on, ever on to some unknown destination.

He wondered how soon another train would come along. Then he frowned. This track was only a single line, hastily laid and still unballasted. It had the earmarks of some new branch line.

A sudden premonition caused him to turn and sharply scan the mountains to the west. The range rose abruptly some ten miles away. It seemed nearer at hand in the brittle air, beneath the menacing, colorless sky, the sawtooth rim lifting sharply against the ominous yellowish haze that was breaking in from the north. And Tallant suddenly laughed softly, mirthlessly.

Better than any spot on earth, he knew those mountains. There was old Eagle Nest Peak, with its circular top, and below that was the purple slash that marked Crying Squaw Canyon.

The whole range leaped up around him now in bitter familiarity. He was home! He laughed again, and the sound was as bleak as the whine of the rising wind.

Then ghosts of the past came up and

rode the wind around Jay Tallant as he stood there, driving even that cheerless laughter from his lips, and bringing an emotion into his throat that he had believed was forever dead. He cursed himself for weak sentimentality, and he cursed the destiny that had caused him to board a freight bound a hundred miles off his route southward.

But something kept welling up in his throat even though he tried to forget the long-ago vision of a reckless, red-haired kid in cowboots and oversize chaps, riding with the roundup crew right here at Antelope Springs. And with it came the mental image of a blue-eyed, freckled girl with bare legs and rust-colored hair who tried to dress and talk like a boy. That kid was himself as he had been only ten years ago, and the girl was his twin sister, Jane Tallant. These sage flats on which he stood shivering were part of his father's ranch.

The railroad was new. That was the only change in the landscape in more than ten years. But Jay Tallant had changed.

HE saw cattle stringing into a coulée, and he made out the Tumbling T brand. Jay Tallant had heeled and rustled many a calf up to the branding fire to take that famous cattle brand.

He pictured the solid old ranch house in the lee of Lobo Butte a dozen miles to the north, offering its sanctuary and hospitality to everyone, as it had always done for the past forty years. It was the house in which he and Jane had been born ten minutes apart, and where their mother had died that the infant twins might come into the world.

Past that rugged house, the last of the great buffalo herds had drifted in years gone by, and against its thick walls more than one Sioux war party had vainly shattered their lances. As a toddling child there Jay Tallant had clung to the knee of old Jim Bridger, the trail-blazer, and had heard him talk of Kit Carson. The yellow-haired Custer had paused there at Tumbling T ranch for a meal before marching on into the shambles on the Little Bighorn, and later the forceful, herd-riding.

Teddy Roosevelt had been a welcome guest. It was from that house that Jay's father, Fremont Tallant, had gone to serve two terms in the United States Senate.

Jay Tallant thought of the ruddy glow from the great fireplace that would be playing through the windows of the living room as a beacon to riders seeking refuge from the oncoming blizzard. That house was open to all men, except to Jay Tallant, son of its owner. For Jay knew that there his name had not been mentioned for ten years . . .

He forced these gibbering ghosts into the dark corners of his mind. Eagle Nest Peak was dissolving into the saffron-tinged mist and the high plain lay bleakly forlorn. The wind began to take on an eerie, twanging sound. Scudding snow, like robes of ghouls, raced across the flats.

The old Tumbling T bog camp was in the river flats, some four or five miles directly west, would be deserted in winter. Jay wrapped the soogan around his shoulders and moved out to face the full drive of the rising blizzard.

But when he had traveled a mile Jay Tallant knew that the odds were banked high against his ever reaching the bog camp. He rested briefly in the lee of a cut-bank where half a dozen cattle huddled and bawled dismally. In the spring, riders would find their bones at that spot. And they would also likely find his own whitening skeleton when the snow banks began to dwindle.

They would wonder who he had been, and would likely bury him in the corner of the ranch graveyard reserved for name-

less men. Perhaps his own father would read the Lord's Prayer over his grave, and Jane would stand there looking down, and pondering the mystery of this drifter's past.

But Jay Tallant was not waiting there to die standing still like the cattle. When the numbness began to make itself apparent in his legs, he pushed on, into the storm.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Out of the Storm

THE blizzard-lashed day was dying early, and all landmarks were blotted out in the roaring blast of snow. Jay drove doggedly on without rest now, knowing that to stop again was death.

He set his course by the push of the wind, quartering into it, and praying that it had not veered from the north. Now and then he floundered into snow-choked coulées, and the struggle to emerge again and fight on, drained his vitality to the dregs.

Darkness was near, and the end of life was near for Jay Tallant when he staggered into the lee of a high red shale bluff. He recognized it as Red Bluff. It overlooked the aspen flats of Thundercloud River. The bog shack lay in its lee not far ahead. He could not miss the shack if he followed the base of the bluff.

Racing the thickening twilight, he floundered through drifted snow. Blindly he came against barbed wire. That brought a twinge of doubt to his numbed mind. There had been no wire at this point that he ever remembered. But he had been away ten years.

From somewhere came the bawling of cattle and he knew that they were piling up against the wire. That would be more work for the bone pickers in spring. A hell of a place for a fence! Someone should be out here, cutting the wire to let them drift on into the cedar breaks up the river.

Jay tried to pull the wire down, but gave it up as hopeless. He climbed the fence and struggled on. At last he paused. He was approaching the aspen thickets, facing the full drive of the storm. He had missed the bog camp, or more likely it was no longer here.

The blizzard sought to have its way with him now. Slowly Jay Tallant began to drift with the storm. It was carrying him back to that drift fence against which the bewildered cattle were massing. Full darkness had come. Jay was beginning to flounder on. Twice he fell down and had to exert all his energies to struggle up again. Then he stopped. It was only instinct that made him know that it was a horse and rider that loomed up suddenly ahead.

He heard the thin twang of parting wire above the drone of the wind, and knew that he had come upon some cowhand who was cutting the fence to give the cattle a chance. The rider came nearer and he clawed at a stirrup to attract attention. He heard a voice, and it brought a dull twinge of surprise. This rider who had risked death to help the cattle, was a woman!

She swung down, supporting him with supple arms. "I'll help you into the saddle," she shouted above the roar of the wind.

Jay Tallant resented the fact that it was a woman who had saved him. Somehow he resented being saved at all. Death here in the blizzard would have solved a lot of problems for him.

She rode behind him, steadying him with sturdy strength. She forced the horse into the teeth of the blizzard, and seemed to know her way. A deadly drowsiness was stealing upon Jay when a lamp, set in a window as a beacon, loomed suddenly through the blinding wall of snow.

The horse halted in a storm shed, and the girl helped him from the saddle, assisting his numb progress to the door of a lodgepole cabin.

Near the door she lifted her voice in a hail. "Buck!"

There was no response. She called again, and now Jay fancied that dread rose into her tone.

She opened the latch, and helped him in, placing him on a bunk. Hurriedly, she added fresh fuel to the rock fireplace where a bed of red ambers glowed.

She threw off her long wolfskin coat and hood, tossed frozen fur gauntlets to a shelf over the stove. She wore a heavy, dark, divided skirt of homespun, and a thick knitted red sweater.

She stripped off Jay's boots and mackinaw. "Face and hands pinched," she muttered. "And feet too."

The warmth of the cabin drove lethargy through Jay. She was only a vague, wavery figure moving about him. But soon the snow she rubbed on his frozen skin began to burn like fire, arousing him.

SHE was younger than he had supposed—hardly more than twenty-one, he judged, with finely spun ash-blonde hair, twisted into a practical knot at the back of her head, and big, frank eyes, almost violet in their depths. Perhaps not a beautiful face, with its resolute little chin, shadowed cheeks beneath full cheekbones, and a straight, small nose over a frank mouth; but it was a face that soothed a weary man.

Jay became aware that she was always listening to the tumult of the blizzard as though seeking out some other sound. The gale battered the cabin, dealing solid blows. Eerie voices rode the night, at times sounding like the moans of tormented, screaming human beings.

Once she leaped eagerly to the door, standing there braced against the wind. And again she lifted her voice into a frantic scream into the storm. "Buck!"

Only the scream of the storm replied. She forced the door shut with a despairing gesture, and returned to Jay.

He motioned her away. "I'm all right now," he declared.

She turned away, and now he wondered at the aloof hostility of her manner.

"You're a Tumbling T rider, I imagine?" she asked curtly.

Jay studied her a moment. "No. I was put off a freight train at the water tank out in the flats. I was hunting cover from the blizzard when you found me."

She thought that over, studying him. Subtly her manner changed. She thawed a little toward him.

"I'll rustle some grub and coffee," she said.

Then again she stood silently a mo-

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ment, tilting her shapely head as she scanned the howling uproar outside for the voice she hoped to hear.

"Your husband, ma'am?" Jay asked. "Is he out there?"

"Not my husband," she said, with a nervous little laugh, but my brother, Buck Sevier. He went to Big Lodge this morning, about fifteen miles north. He was to be home by dark. I'm Bessie Sevier."

"He's likely holed up somewhere," Jay tried to reassure her. "At some ranch, no doubt."

"There's no ranch except Fremont Tallant's Tumbling T along the way," she said bitterly. "Buck would never go there." Then she hurried into the kitchen.

Jay was thoughtful as he watched her move about the stove. He wondered by what right this girl and her brother ran cattle in the Thundercloud flats. This river range had always been his father's best summer grazing.

"Squatters," Jay thought, and shrugged.

He watched the look of uneasiness increase to fear in her softly tanned face. And then he too began to listen, searching through the howl of the storm for some hopeful sound. But he could hear nothing beyond the wild song of the wind.

At last he pulled on his boots. "I'd be pleased to make a search for him if you'd loan me a horse, ma'am," he offered.

She came into the room, shaking her head despairingly. "That's hopeless, and you know it. I'd hunt for Buck myself if I thought there was a chance. You're a stranger here, and you'd only get lost."

"I've been in this range before," Jay remarked casually as he headed for the door. "I know the trail to Big Lodge."

Determinedly, she barred the way. "You're in no shape to buck the blizzard. You're about tuckered. You look like—well, like you haven't been eating regularly." She saw the unchanged purpose in his face.

"It isn't entirely the blizzard that worries me," she added hastily. "A blizzard wouldn't stop a man like Buck. But I didn't want him to go to town at all today. We're in trouble—"

There was a sound at the door. Jay wheeled and opened it. The wind thrust a snow-plastered man into the room. Jay caught him as he began to slump to the floor.

"Buck!" Bessie Sevier screamed.

Jay saw the dark stain of frozen blood on the sheep-lined windbreaker.

"He's been shot," the girl gasped. "Oh, I was afraid of it. I knew something like this was coming next. Fremont Tallant! That awful, selfish old man. He shot Buck!"

JAY lifted the dazed man to the bunk. "Shot in the arm," he announced tersely. "Might not be so bad. It's the cold and the storm that's done him in, maybe."

The girl steadied instantly and ran to help. Silently they worked on her brother. Removing his coat and shirt they saw a bullet slash through the muscles of his right upper arm. It had stopped bleeding.

"Nothing to worry about," Jay remarked. "Hardly more'n a scratch. Hand me that brandy bottle."

Buck Sevier began to revive as they cleansed and bound his wound, and treated his frost-bitten face. He was a lanky, weather-browned cowboy, only two or three years older than the girl, Jay decided. He liked the square, aggressive cut of Buck Sevier's jaws. He moved back when Sevier's eyes began to open.

"Bess," the brother mumbled, "they damned near got me."

"Oh, Buck!" she sobbed. "How did it happen?"

"It was Beaver Watts, that Tumblin' T

puncher I kicked off the ranch last week," he muttered. "He laid for me on the trail, five miles outta town. Notched on me with a rifle. The horse saw him, an' shied as he fired, so he just pinked me on the arm. I fell off, an' slung a couple slugs at him as he piled his horse back in the cedars. Couldn't tell whether I hit him."

The girl was seriously silent for a moment. "Buck," she finally murmured huskily. "It's a hopeless fight. We might as well admit we're licked."

Her brother lifted his head angrily. "Not by a damned sight!" he gritted. "I never thought you'd ever say that Bess. Yuh don't really mean you want tuh cave in now—after all we've gone through?"

"They'll kill you, Buck!" she breathed hopelessly. "It isn't worth it. Let Fremont Tallant have this grass, if that's all he covets. We can start somewhere else."

"I'll never knuckle to that frozen-eyed, selfish old wolf. I went to him like a white man again today, offered to sell for jest what we had paid. He eyed me as he would a yella cur. Said he never compromised with squatters. Damn his narrow-minded, stubborn soul—he ain't human. He's nothin' but a machine—a money-makin' machine."

Buck Sevier sat up, and now for the first time he discovered Jay standing by the fireplace.

"It's all right, Buck," the girl explained hastily. "He's only a stranger I found wandering on foot in the blizzard. I was out cutting that old fence around the bog hole. The stock was beginning to pile up against it."

Buck Sevier came shakily to his feet, eyeing Jay with suspicion. "Maybe he's all right, an' maybe he ain't," he growled. "What's your name, fella?"

"Names don't mean much," Jay said stonily. "I landed in this range by accident. Hopped the wrong train. Your sister saved my life. It wasn't worth much, but she showed sand in riding that storm to save cattle and other drifters like me, so I'll remember it."

"Yeah," Buck Sevier grated with sarcasm. "An' maybe you was sent by Fremont Tallant tuh poison some more feed stacks or cut our line fences so his Tumblin' T critters could graze us off."

His sister pushed him back. "Take it easy, Buck," she advised. "You're beginning to look upon everyone as an enemy. Not that I blame you much. But this man seems to be telling the truth. Look at him. He looks like a—a—"

She hesitated, confused. "Like a bum!" Jay grated. "Is that the word you're trying to think of?"

The brother and sister glanced at each other, wondering at the cynical bitterness of Jay's tone. Buck Sevier's grimness faded a trifle.

"Maybe I was a little hasty, stranger," Buck conceded. "Come to think of it, yuh don't exactly carry the Tumblin' T earmark. It's my guess you could stand a couple of square meals, an' a day or two by a warm stove."

"Yeah," Jay remarked. "I don't believe a man like Fremont Tallant would have anything to do with a tumbleweeder like me."

Buck eyed him closely. "Yuh know Tallant?" he asked.

"I know of him," Jay remarked indifferently. "I've heard he owns this range, the grass, the banks—an' the people."

"He doesn't own us!" Bessie Sevier flashed. "And he never will. He's trying to run us out of the Thundercloud."

"It's always open season on squatters," Jay said coldly.

HER temper flared. "I'll have you know we're not squatters," she said sharply. "We own this land—paid cash

for it. It wasn't until we brought in our little herd that we realized the man who sold it to us was a title shark. He had found an error in the old survey. These flats still belonged to the government. The title shark bought it, sold it to us. We tried to do the right thing, in offering to sell to Fremont Tallant for just what we had paid. He refused to buy, called us thieves and squatters. He's determined to drive us out, ruin us!"

Her pretty eyes blazed. "He's made outcasts of us. Nobody dares to be friendly with us, for fear Fremont Tallant will resent it. Every time Buck goes to town he has trouble with some of Tallant's cowboys. Now it's come to gunfighting."

"I'm apologizing," Jay said. "I didn't really think folks like you were squatters."

Bessie Sevier had planned other things to say, but the manner of this ragged drifter disconcerted and nettled her. "I need no apology from you," she snapped. "And I don't know why I bothered to explain this to a man like you."

She flounced into the kitchen. Buck Sevier grinned a little, and winced as his shoulder sent a stab of pain. "Yuh riled her, drifter. She's got a temper. Don't prod her too much or she'll bend a poker over yore head"

Then Sevier's thoughts wandered grimly. "It's a good range tuh steer clear of, drifter," he muttered. "I wish Bessie was out of it. But I can't talk her into leaving without me, an' damned if I'll cave in to Fremont Tallant. If it's hot lead they want from now on, I'm ready tuh give 'em a bellyful."

He paused moodily. "As long as I last," he added.

Jay said nothing. He went out and took care of the two unsaddled horses in the shed, fighting his way against the blinding blizzard. When he returned, Bessie Sevier had steaming coffee and beef stew on the table.

It was a silent meal. Her pointed coldness toward him seemed to glance harmlessly from Jay. Inwardly his soul writhed. He hated himself, hated his ragged, dusty garb, his seedy, whiskered shagginess For the first time he realized how far down the scale he had allowed himself to slide. He wondered if it was too late to come back.

Then he sneered inwardly at such thoughts. What the hell did he care what the world thought of him? He remembered those red days and nights in the boom camps down on the Arizona border, when he had worn a law badge, when tough killers and gunmen had stepped aside for him.

Solid citizens had truckled to him then, slapped him on the back and vied for the privilege of buying drinks for him. That was when he was cleaning up a town, making it safe for lesser men.

And afterwards, he recollected how these same substantial men had began avoiding him on the street, and how respectable women had brushed their skirts aside at his passage, and the way children had been influenced to run and hide at his coming. He'd been hailed as a town-tamer at first, and a hero. But after the fighting was done, he'd been branded gunman, killer—a blood-smeared freak . . .

The girl arranged a bed on a cot in the kitchen for Jay. She occupied a little lean-to off the living room. The blizzard lashed at the cabin, and Bessie Sevier dozed fitfully in her bed. Once she screamed out from the depths of a nightmare. Her brother tossed in the living room bunk, rising often to pace the floor and ease the pain of his throbbing arm.

IN the kitchen Jay Tallant lay sleepless, racked by black remorse, and futile, searing memories. He recalled the bitter,

winter night, ten years in the past, when a wounded fugitive with a posse on his trail, had come to the Tumbling T ranch for help.

Jay had listened at the keyhole of the living room door. The outlaw was sinewy and red-haired. He was the brother of Jay's dead mother—Jay's blood uncle.

Fremont Tallant, campaigning for election to the United States Senate, had stood there, cold and relentless. "I can't help you, Jay Wheeler," Jay's crisp-lipped father had said. "Men like you deserve no help, You're a Wheeler, and all of you have a wild streak that will lead you to a bad end. My own son was named for you. I only hope that none of your wild blood will ever appear in him. Sometimes, for that reason, I've always regretted that I have a son."

Something cold had entered Jay's soul then. It had never melted. When Jay Wheeler staggered from the house after that fruitless interview with his brother-in-law, young Jay Tallant was waiting for him in the shadows with two big, fresh horses.

Jay remembered that freezing night, and how cold and distant the stars had been as he rode away with a wounded outlaw. And the relentless pursuit by a posse, that drove them deeper until they reached the outlaw stronghold in Jackson's Hole. There his uncle had died of his wound. But young Jay Tallant had gone on, following the gun-trails, sometimes as a longrider, sometimes as a fighting free-lance badge-toter.

Jay thought of his twin sister, Jane, and ached to see her again. Jane had been high-spirited and sensitive. He wondered if her spirit had been crushed by the ramrod discipline that Fremont Tallant demanded of everyone with whom he dealt.

Now that same Fremont Tallant was trying to crush the spirit of Bessie Sevier and her brother in the same way. He could hear Bessie murmuring in her sleep. Once she uttered his father's name, and there was helpless, weary fear in her voice. . . .

## CHAPTER THREE

### Feud Range

TOWARD morning the blizzard quieted to a steady, driving wind that whipped up a scudding snow and sent it rattling against the cabin window panes.

"It'll blow out before noon," Buck Sevier remarked as they sat down to the breakfast Bessie had ready. "It's quittin' sooner than I expected. We won't lose any stock in this one."

"I'll be moving on," Jay announced as the meal was finished. "I'm thankin' you, an' hope some day I can square the—"

The muffled rumble of hoofs in the snow beat suddenly upon the house. Jay, through a frosted window pane, saw the blurred figures of riders leap from saddles at the front.

He stepped out of sight in the kitchen an instant before the front door was flung open and a crew of armed men tramped inside.

Buck Sevier uttered a growl of rage, and strode into the living room, headed for the wall where his .45 hung. But a harsh voice halted him.

"Stand still, Sevier!"

Bessie Sevier, ashen-faced ran into the bigger room. "What are you going to do?" she demanded. "Stay away from my brother! He's wounded!"

Jay knew by the ring of spurs that four or five riders had entered.

"One of the boys come ridin' into the ranch with a bullet in his back last night," a man growled in answer. "It was Beaver Watts, a cowboy who had trouble with yore brother last week. Beaver cashed in five minutes after he fell off in front

of the bunkhouse. He told us who couléed him as he was ridin' fence along the town trail yesterday. Buck Sevier murdered him."

"He didn't," the girl breathed. "Beaver Watts lied. He shot at Buck from ambush. I know what you plan to do. You mean to hang Buck. Fremont Tallant sees his chance to git rid of my brother. Well, you're not going to take him. I'll—"

Jay heard her race toward the gun rack.

"Grab her!" someone shouted.

Boots thudded, and Buck Sevier cursed. A struggle was going on in the living room.

Jay's gunbelt was draped over a chair. He plucked the six-shooter from the holster and stepped into the doorway. Bessie was struggling desperately in the arms of a cowboy who wore a canvas windbreaker. Two more riders had leaped on her brother, driving him back against the wall where he fought them, the veins bulging in his temples.

Jay stepped into the room, swung the gun muzzle on the head of the cowboy who held the girl. The puncher reeled back with a groan, and went to his knees, dazed.

Jay stepped back, his muzzle swinging and covering the other four. "Get away from Sevier," he ordered. "And stand as you are. I'll blast the first man who turns to swing a gun in this direction."

They were turned away from him. They twisted their heads and stared over their shoulders at him. The hands of the two men fell away from Buck Sevier.

"Who are you?" one of them blurted out.

"Just a tumbleweed," Jay remarked. "Start moving for the door. You're pulling out of here, boys."

He could see them shifting their weights, edging their boots into position to leap. They were sinewy, reckless men with plenty of nerve and savvy. They appraised their lone opponent, and Jay saw their scorn rise.

"Yuh had better tumble on, amigo," a Texan drawled. "You're protectin' a sneakin' dry-gulcher who was accused of murder by a dyin' man."

"Dying men can lie as can the living," Jay stated. "I was here last night when Sevier came in with that wounded arm. It's my belief that this Beaver Watts slung the first bullet."

"Not knowin' who yuh are, yore word don't swing any weight with us," the Texan sneered. "We're four to one. You might down one of us, maybe two. But we'll get you. Pull in yore horns, or give us any name you want sent back to yore folks."

Jay smiled icily. "The name," he said softly. "Is Tallant—Jay Tallant. Now turn your wolf loose, boys."

THE creeping shift of their bodies ended. Bessie Sevier drew a sharp breath, and her brother's shocked eyes leaped to Jay. Silence held in that room through which the wind swirled a film of snow from the open door.

The faces of the four riders were ludicrous playgrounds of shifting thoughts. Amazement was replaced by incredulity. That gave way to half-belief. They watched the eyes of this ragged man there in the door, and did not move.

Bessie Sevier and her brother felt themselves suddenly removed from all this, looking on like spectators. They saw the reckless assurance of the Tumbling T riders ebb away. Something like a shadow of fear crossed their faces. A man moved dry lips and broke the silence.

"Tallant?" he echoed. "Then yo're the old man's—"

"The name," came the brittle response. "Is Jay Tallant. Call your play now, or

head for the door. And don't look back."

They glanced at each other uncertainly, and eyed Jay again. "What are you doin' here with these—?" one began.

"Rattle your hocks," Jay snapped. "An' take this one with the broken head along."

The Texan shrugged. "He's Jay Tallant, boys," he admitted hoarsely. "I seen him in Douglas five years ago. Didn't recognize him at first. He's changed some. I reckon we better let it ride awhile."

They moved through the door, helping the stunned cowboy. Jay followed them to the outer step.

Gusty wind was driving a blinding wall of snow high in the air. The galloping forms of two riders emerged from the spume, and threw back their horses a rope's length away.

One was a spare-bodied, square-jawed man of fifty, with a trimmed, iron-gray mustache. His eyes were as bright and hard as polished steel beneath straight graying brows. He wore a heavy bear-skin coat. His companion was a salty-looking old cowboy.

Jay Tallant's lips tightened. Fremont Tallant was looking at his five cowboys. "What happened?" he demanded curtly. "Did you find Sevier?"

They did not answer. Their eyes turned to the house, and Fremont Tallant twisted in the saddle. Slowly he seemed to freeze and grow still harder as he saw Jay.

"You!" he muttered.

"So you recognized me, even as a drifter," Jay remarked tonelessly.

Fremont Tallant's face was gray and bleak. "To my sorrow," he said in a brittle voice. "What are you doing here?"

"Preventing the lynching of an innocent man."

Fremont Tallant glanced at his men, and understood. His shoulders lost some of their aggressive pride. "So, you've come here to oppose me, too," he muttered. "It wasn't enough that outlaws, rustlers and range thieves try to swarm over me, but my own s—"

He refused to let the word pass his lips. Suddenly he whirled his horse, ground steel into its flanks, and whirled away as though pursued by phantoms.

FREMONT TALLANT'S riders looked at each other sharply. It was the first time any of them had ever seen their boss display emotion or evade an issue. They mounted silently and followed.

But the seamy old cowboy who had come with Fremont Tallant lingered there in the saddle. He looked at Jay.

"Howdy, kid," he remarked.

Jay moved out. "Howdy, Shanty," he said. And he fought back the sudden lump that came in his throat as he shook hands.

He should have known that Shanty Bemis would never forget him or turn against him.

Shanty, range boss of the Tumbling T for longer than Jay could remember, had been a second father to Jay and Jane. It was to Shanty the twins had always gone with their childhood problems, and it was Shanty's word that had always been final with them.

Time had warped Shanty Bemis a little more, thinning his stringy old hair, and frosting it where it straggled down on his weathered forehead. The usual cud of tobacco lumped his knotty cheek. He cussed the same old rheumy twinges as he lifted his bowed frame to the ground.

Shanty ignored the ten years that had passed, overlooked the change in Jay. "Jane will be right happy to see yuh, boy," he said. "She was askin' me about you only the other day."

"How is she, Shanty?"

Shanty looked at him strangely.

"Healthy enough, I reckon. An' purty as a red wagon. The baby is kinda keepin' her busy. He's red-headed an' hard tuh handle as a fuzztail colt."

"Baby? Then Jane is married?"

Shanty spat deliberately. "Two years ago. I reckon you'll remember the man she married. Lang Minter, the lawyer's son."

Jay's face fell. "Yeah," he answered after a moment. "I remember Lang Minter. Went to school with him."

Shanty shrugged. "I know how yuh feel, boy. Minter wasn't the man for your sister. I recollect how he used tuh lay for yuh, an' maul yuh on the way home from school. An' how one day, after Pug Smith had taught you how to use your mitts, yuh smacked hell out of him, an' sent him high-tailin' home, howlin' for his maw. But he's your brother-in-law now."

Jay's lips tightened. "Why did Jane marry that whelp?"

"He wasn't no common cowman's son, Jay. His dad was from one of them first families, an' wore a white collar every day down to that lawyer's office, which had his name in gilt letters on a glass door."

"I savvy," Jay muttered. "Jane was brow-beaten into it."

"After you cut yore string there wasn't nobody to help her stand against your paw," Shanty stated. "He had his way with Jane—jest as he has had his way with everyone but you."

Jay looked at him, a cold glint in his eye. "So you're trying to tell me that Jane needs me? Is Lang Minter—?" He paused. "Where is she, Shanty? At the ranch?"

"Nope. She lives in Big Lodge. Minter's cashier in yore father's bank. He's runnin' with a bad crowd, Jay. I watched him last night, settin' in a stiff stud game in Jules Duprey's honkytonk—with a black-haired dancin' girl hoverin' at his elbow. I don't figure yore dad knows where Lang spends most of his spare time. The old man wouldn't sleep at nights if he knew his cashier was hob-nobbin' with oily crooks like Jules Duprey an' that bunch that hangs out at the Red Rocket."

"Duprey?" Jay repeated. "He's new to me."

Shanty nodded. "You'll find the town changed, Jay. An' fer the worse. They've hit gold in the Thunderclouds. Big Lodge has boomed an' gone hard an' bad. Buzzards have come in. Killers produce a man for breakfast right frequent. Outlaws are makin' it tough on Wells Fargo, an' as a sideline they're runnin' Tumblin' T cattle. The ranch ain't doin' so well. If it wasn't for the bank, I've a hunch yore dad would be out of the cattle business. The bank makes money, but the ranch loses it jest as fast."

"Got any dinero on you, Shanty?" Jay asked. "I need new clothes."

Shanty emptied his pockets, passing over two gold pieces and some paper currency. "Don't forget to shave, kid," he grinned. "Them whiskers look like a forest fire."

Shanty turned to his horse. He looked at the house. "This is another mistake your dad made," he commented. "Buck Sevier's a square-shootin' cowboy an' his sister's a thoroughbred. Tell 'em that not all the Tumblin' T riders have worked ag'in 'em. Nor all the Tallants. Jane has tried tuh reason with her father, but she didn't get any place."

Shanty lifted himself into the saddle. "Lang Minter needs some stern advice, boy," he added. "Maybe a hell of a good workin' over with your fists will do it—but don't ever let Jane know what yo're up to. She'd never forgive yuh. She's never made a whimper tuh me, an' she'd be the last to ask you to help."

Jay stood watching Shanty ride away.

He turned to find Bessie Sevier standing on the step, staring at him strangely. And her brother stood in the door, moody and thoughtful.

"Wind's dyin' down," Jay remarked slowly. "It's clearin' off. A good day to hit the trail. I'll be shovin' along. If you loan me a horse to Big Lodge I'll be grateful."

Buck Sevier nodded. "That short-coupled roan in the shed is yours for keeps if you want, Tallant. I'm not forgettin' that you staved off a stretched neck for me."

Jay saddled the horse. As he was about to mount, Bessie stepped into the gloomy shed. She was muffled in her wolfskin coat. Her eyes were deep pools.

"Goodbye," she said, and held out her hand.

Her fingers were warm and firm against Jay's chilled palm. "I wish you luck—and contentment," she murmured, her eyes were steady on his. "Above all, contentment. And you'll never find it if you continue to drift. You'll always drift until you begin to fight these things that drive you on. And you can fight. The world knows that."

He remembered Bessie Sevier as she had looked when she was fighting to get a gun to save her brother. He recalled the strength with which she had fought the blizzard to save the cattle and to save him. And the odds she and her brother were up against.

"I will come back here some day," Jay said abruptly.

Color rose to her cheeks, as she saw his meaning. "You're a Tallant," she said, and turned away. "It's your duty to stand by your father. Goodbye."

She almost ran back to the house. But as Jay rode away he looked back, and saw her face at the window watching him.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Ranch of Broken Hearts!

BIG LODGE was no longer the sleepy cowtown Jay remembered. In the brittle, still cold of the mid-afternoon that had succeeded the blizzard, the town sprawled far over the bench, reaching out with its frame and mud shacks toward the foothills of the Thunderclouds. A stamp mill thundered beyond the railroad yards, and Jay could see the mouths of two big shafts on the mountainside to the west where hard rock shafts were being ripped deeper day and night.

Grubstake miners and hopeful prospectors, driven from the mountains by winter, hugged the stoves in the score of bar-rooms and gambling houses that lifted their ornate fronts along the rutted snowy street.

Jay left the horse at a livery, paying a week's feed bill, with instructions to return the animal to Buck Sevier at first opportunity. He inquired the way to the home of his sister.

The hostler eyed him dubiously, but directed him to a side street, and described a green clapboarded cottage.

Moving away Jay saw one familiar structure. The Big Lodge Stockman's Bank, occupied the same severe, granite structure on the main corner. Fremont Tallant had founded that bank, and was its president and principal stockholder.

The blinds were drawn, for it was past banking hours. A man came from the door as Jay passed on the opposite sidewalk. Jay had to look twice to identify Lang Minter, his brother-in-law.

Minter, heavy-set, with florid face and dark sideburns was a stylish figure in dove-gray overcoat and cloth stiff hat. He twirled a walking stick, and passed over Jay without a second glance.

Jay watched Minter stroll languidly through the guilded door of a honkatonk

whose sign proclaimed it as Jules Duprey's Red Rocket.

Jay paused a moment, then shrugged and went on. He bought a cheap suit at a store, went to a hotel, bathed and shaved. He viewed himself in the distorted dresser mirror, studying the little, tight puckers that had come around his mouth and eyes, the lines of repression that lay heavily about his thin lips. He wondered if Jane would recognize him.

It was dusk when he turned into the gate of the little cottage. He saw the outline of winter-bound flower beds, and the neatness of the yard. He had to steel himself to twist the handle of the bell.

The door opened. A sweet-faced young woman, with a curly-haired child hanging to her apron hem stood there.

"Jay!" Then Jane rushed into his arms, half-laughing, half-sobbing. "Jay! Is it really you? It's been so long, so terribly long."

LATER, in the parlor with the boy on his knee, Jay watched that first joyous animation fade. Shadows came back to Jane's sea-blue eyes. Jane Tallant was a comely woman, with her full, oval features, red-bronze hair and shapely figure.

She stroked her child's silky hair. "He was christened Langford Minter, Junior," she said. "But I call him Jay."

"Where's Lang?" Jay asked casually.

Her face betrayed nothing. "I'm afraid he won't be home until late," she said. "He's so busy at the bank. Dad made him cashier six months ago, you know."

Rage seethed in Jay. He condemned his father for forcing Jane into this existence as a forgotten, neglected wife, waiting here alone in this tomb-like house with its stuffy, Eastern furnishings. Too proud to exhibit the vain longings in her soul, or her heart-break, she was also too courageous to complain.

"Why did you do it, Jane?" he gritted savagely. "Why did you marry Lang Minter?"

She went pale. "Don't, Jay," she breathed pleadingly.

"I'll take you away," he rasped. "I know why you did it. To please your father. Because he wanted his daughter to marry a Minter. Because Lang Minter's father was a stiff-necked lawyer and a politician. Because—"

She came to her feet. "Stop! What right have you to talk like that to me. You, who ran away and broke Dad's heart!"

She paused, seeing the cynical light leap into his face.

"Yes, Jay, I mean just that," she rushed on. "You were too young to know just how much he thought of you, what plans he had made for you, and the high hopes he had in store. He loved you. He loves me. He wanted me to marry Lang. He had his heart set on it."

"And you sacrificed yourself, so as not to hurt him like I did," Jay said bitterly. "If I hadn't gone with the wild bunch, this wouldn't have happened to you."

She came to him then. "No, Jay," she said steadily. "I didn't mean it that way. I'm no martyr. I have my home, my baby boy. What more could a woman want?"

"You have everything—but happiness," Jay said grimly.

She looked at him with fear. "Jay, don't interfere in this. Lang is the father of my baby. I wouldn't ever want anything to happen that might hurt him when he grows up. For his sake, at least, I'll be a good wife."

Jay kissed her, and fell into a gray mood. He had believed that he knew the utmost meaning of gameness and courage. He had seen men die with their boots on, going up against overwhelming odds with

a laugh and a jest. Now he knew that he had never more than scratched the surface of human bravery. It was easy to die. Even a coward could die. But life was the real challenge.

And he thought of Bessie Sevier and her brother out there standing resolutely against certain ruin and perhaps death. They were facing life too, not running away from it. Jay Tallant called himself a yellow coward. For he realized then as he never had before, that he had run away from life.

After a time he left his sister's house. Fierce restlessness drove him to roam the wintry streets. At last, man-like he disregarded his sister's plea. He headed through the freezing darkness and entered the Red Rocket. He meant to have a talk with Lang Minter. . . .

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Drifter's Boothill Play

THE Red Rocket was crowded, and a tinseled blonde sang on a tiny stage at the rear. Gambling layouts were busy, and the bar was three deep. A battery of cannon stoves glowed down the length of the flat-topped, smoke-fogged honka-tonk.

Jay found a place at the long bar, and toyed with a drink while he sized up the place. He saw no sign of Minter in the crowd.

A brawny man, his travel-stained long coat rimed with frost, pushed roughly to his side at the bar. Jay glanced up annoyed, then looked closer. A mirthless smile tugged at his lips.

"Hello, Hickman," he murmured.

The big man whirled, startled, smothering a curse. He had thick, brutal features, with a crooked nose and pale, yellowish eyes. He glared at Jay a long time.

"You made a mistake, fella," he finally growled. "My name's Jones. Arch Jones."

"The name was Sam Hickman when I brought you back out of Mexico, after that stage was blown up outside of Douglas and the express box taken," Jay said quietly. "And it's the one you went to Yuma Prison under. I reckon you didn't serve your twenty years, Sam. It wasn't good behavior that got you out."

Sam Hickman, cold-blooded killer and Border runner, turned away and moved through the crowd. Jay watched him grimly. Sam Hickman had sworn some day to kill him. And Hickman was a man who preferred to shoot from the dark rather than take his vengeance openly.

Jay noticed two more hard-visaged patrons glance at Hickman, who moved on through the door into the outer darkness. And these two gun-packing men soon left the Red Rocket also.

Jay heard the gossip of gold all along the bar—of pay lodes, and outcrops and prospects, and of the latest outlaw exploit. A paymaster had been murdered on his way to one of the shafts, and ten thousand in cash taken.

"It was the same outlaw bunch that's been raisin' hell for two months around here, most likely," someone said. "An' these sneakin' curs don't leave any livin' witnesses. I seen that cleanup wagon they dynamited in Lobo Canyon a month ago. Three men blown tuh hell, an' a thousand ounces of bar bullion gone. An' how about that train that was ditched into Owl Crick—"

This sounded to Jay like some of Sam Hickman's methods. Then his attention veered. An aproned waiter, carrying a tray of bottles and glasses, had entered a private poker room off to the left. Through the briefly-opened door Jay glimpsed a five-hand stud game in operation under the white circle of a shaded

lamp. One of the players was his brother-in-law, Lang Minter.

Jay moved upon that closed door. As he reached for the knob, a lounging, cold-eyed house guard, with a dead cigarette dangling in his lip and a low-slung holster, barred the portal with an arm.

"Private game, feller. Move along."

"I'm inviting myself in," Jay murmured. "Here's my ticket."

The gunman felt the ticket. It was the maw of Jay's .45 jammed hard into his side. "You're ambling in with me," Jay said. "Otherwise you might bring a few of your pals to invite me out before I was ready tuh leave."

He prodded the trouble-hawk through the door, then kicked it closed behind him. Faces lifted from the table, and took in the situation.

Jay had learned long ago to size up odds and find the keystone of the opposition. In this case he tabbed a wiry little gambler with a waxed mustache and black, opaque eyes, as the one to watch.

Lang Minter was half-drunk. He was the last to look up. There were no chips on the table. Nothing but gold double eagles. And the stack in front of Minter was small in comparison with the others around the table. Jay appraised the remaining three players and sized them up as professional card sharps, though they passed as mining men, according to their garb.

Jay estimated that there was at least five thousand dollars in sight on the table. "Stiff game for a bank cashier, don't you think, Lang?" he remarked.

Lang Minter peered close, then uttered a thick, outraged oath. "Where in hell did you drop from?" he snarled. "And what do you want?"

"Pick up what money the buzzards haven't taken and come on, Lang," Jay explained curtly. "You're going home."

The little, suavely-garbed gambler placed his hands against the table, his black eyes slitting.

"Don't do it," Jay said pleasantly. "You're thinking of shoving that table into me. I'll drive that diamond stud through your brisket with a hot slug if you try it."

Lang Minter's face went chalky. "Don't start anything, Jules," for God's sake," he cried out, cringing. "That's Jay Tallant. You've heard of him—the Arizona gunhawk!"

JULES DUPREY'S waxen eyelids fluttered, and his wiry body slackened. He shrugged, and placed his hands flat on the top of the table. "The warning is appreciated," he shrugged. "So this is the black sheep of the Tallant family? Under the circumstances I cannot say the meeting is a pleasure."

Jay lifted Minter from his chair, sent him reeling to the door. "Stand quiet," he warned the others as he backed out. Then linking arms with Minter, he marched him to the sidewalk outside.

"How much did they take from you in that game?" he asked.

"None of your damned—" Minter began to snarl.

Jay's grip clamped savagely on his arm. "You lost plenty, I reckon. Where's that money coming from, Minter?"

Minter glared, and his spoiled face began to weaken.

"I know," Jay said with a nod. "From the bank. How much do you owe the bank?"

Minter tried to mumble a denial, but Jay slapped him with a hard palm. And Minter's shabby bravado crumbled. "About—about eight thousand," he admitted, with a whine of self-pity. "I lost most of it tonight. I'm in a hell of a fix, Jay. I've been borrowing from the bank, intending to pay back when my luck

changed. But the damned cards have stayed against me."

"They always do when you play with wolves like that bunch," Jay grated. "I take it the little snake was Jules Duprey. What are you going to do about the shortage at the bank—ask your father-in-law to make good your losses?"

Minter became frantic. "Don't ever let him know!" he begged. "If he ever found it out, he'd be the first to hound me into prison. Damn him, he's got no heart, no soul. He wouldn't care whether I was his son-in-law or not. Him and his preaching about hard work and righteousness."

"I see you've learned to know him," Jay commented dryly. "He hates crooks and drifters."

"I'll kill myself," Minter sobbed.

"Here's a gun," Jay smiled. "Want to use it?"

Minter thrust it away with a whimpering curse. Jay shook him like a limp rag. "You yellow, sniveling pup," he gritted. "Breaking Jane's heart, hanging out with crooks like Jules Duprey, making a thief of yourself while she stays there at home with the baby, eating her soul out. I'd put the slug in you myself, but it would only cause more grief for her."

"Damn you, Tallant, let me alone! I know what I'm doing. I'm not a fool. I'll pay that money back. I know where I can get it. And I'm going to do it."

"Where?"

"That's my secret," Minter said.

Jay slapped him again. "Spill it," he growled. "What's your plan? Something rotten, probably."

Minter's mean little soul cringed. He couldn't evade those bleak eyes that looked like circles of ice in the reflection from distant lights.

"I'm going to turn outlaw," he stuttered.

Jay laughed with helpless scorn. "Outlaw? Why, you spineless pup, it takes sand and guts to turn outlaw."

"I'll show you, Tallant. The bank is sending out some cash tomorrow for deposit in the federal bank at Laramie. Now do you understand."

"Going to hold up a train single-handed?" Jay jeered. "Talk sense."

"It'll be simpler than that," Minter whispered impressively, a boastful note entering his voice. "The money will leave Big Lodge in the ranch wagon tomorrow. It'll be packed in with a load of grub for the Tumbling T. Your father has been smuggling gold and money out of camp by that method for the past two months, ever since the outlaws got busy. The box is put aboard the train at the Antelope Springs water tank."

Jay's silence encouraged him. "Old Saddlepack Barnes always drives the wagon," Minter added. "And there's only one shotgun guard concealed inside. I can handle the guard. It'll be easy."

"How'll you handle the guard?" Jay asked thinly.

Minter looked at him, and shrugged. "You treacherous rat," Jay spat. "I know how you'd handle him if it came to a pinch. You'd kill him. Cowards always do. And you'd be run down and lynched. Think up something else, Lang. You'd bungle this. Think up something more in your line."

"There's no other way," Minter groaned. "You don't savvy. I've got to work fast. The bank examiners will be here any day. Your father told me so this morning. I'm a ruined man unless I get that money right away. Ruined—do you hear?"

"I'm not giving a damn about you," Jay growled. "I'm thinking of Jane and her baby. That's where the real disgrace will fall. Nothing could hurt a man like you. How much money in this shipment tomorrow, Minter?"

Minter hesitated. "Not much," he said. "Just about enough to cover up what I've lost."

Jay's mouth tightened in a bitter, protesting silence. "You wouldn't have a chance, Minter," he said flatly. "You know that. Saddlepack or the gun-guard would be sure to recognize you. Even if you got away with the money, you wouldn't have an alibi. The old man would suspect you."

He stood in somber reflection for a time. "I'll do this dirty job," he stated flatly. "I'll deliver the money to you."

Lang Minter's face lighted. "You will?" he breathed joyfully. "Jay, I'll never forget—"

"Hold your tongue, you yellow lizard," Jay snapped. "You knew damned well I'd do it. That's why you was so willing to tell me all about it. You know how much I think of Jane. After I get you out of this tight, Minter, you're going to disappear from Big Lodge. Jane is going to have the chance to divorce you, and forget you ever lived. She's young enough to make her life over again, try to find real happiness. Is that clear?"

Minter began a bitter protest, but bit off the words as he saw Jay's face. "Now," Jay shrugged. "When does the ranch wagon hit the trail? And where will—"

## CHAPTER SIX

### Blood on the Trail

SNOW began to sift down from the leaden clouds that had pushed in to enclose the Thundercloud country at noon. It came down gently at first, almost soothingly. There was no promise of wind, and the temperature had lifted above zero.

Jay looked up at the gray sky, and knew that before dark the range would be buried deep in a white blanket—a blanket that would cover the trail of a wanted man.

He peered through the increasing snow, watching the Tumbling T supply wagon crawl up the narrow trail that mounted the face of Red Bluff. Jay crouched behind a boulder near the top of the steep ascent.

He pulled a bandana mask over the bridge of his nose, and made sure the knot would slip. He set a ragged black felt hat down to hide even his eyebrows. The horse Minter had furnished him, a big, solid bay, was tethered back among the cedars out of sight. Cotton gloves, and a mouldy oilskin that he had stolen from a mule yard in town, swathed him effectively.

Jay's eyes turned briefly to the tiny dot that marked a ranch house out in the river flats three miles away. The ranch house was beginning to fade from view as the snow came down heavier. He was thinking of Bessie Sevier's big, hopeful eyes, and her curving grace, picturing her there in the kitchen of that little log-built house, a smudge of flour on her nose. An aching loneliness beat at him. . . .

Jay drew his gun as the steaming team came up the narrow trail, and passed his hiding place, leaning against the weight of the loaded big spring wagon with the soiled canvas top. Saddlepack Barnes, the Tumbling T cook, was alone on the seat, drowsing in a buffalo robe, a corncob pipe in his teeth.

As the wagon lurched by, Jay leaped out, grasped the tail gate and vaulted into the bed beneath the low hood. A chunky cowboy, who lay bedded down on sacks of spuds and beans, made a quick, startled move to seize a sawed-off shotgun. But Jay covered him.

"Hold it," Jay said hoarsely. "Lift 'em."

Saddlepack Barnes twisted around on

the seat, and his pipe fell and broke on a wheel hub. "Pull up that team," Jay growled."

He shoved the shotgun out of reach. Forcing them to stand, he took their holster guns. He made them turn their backs, then looked over the load.

Lang Minter had told him the money box was cached in a sack of potatoes. He tested the three sacks of spuds with his boot and felt the unyielding outline of the concealed box.

"Spotted 'em luggin' a sack o' spuds outta the bank about daylight this mornin'," he chuckled. "An I'm curious."

He tugged at the sack with his left hand. Its weight was like lead. It required effort to roll it to the tail and dump it into the snow.

He took the shotgun with him as he leaped. "Hi-yah!" he yelled, and stung the roans with frozen mud. Snorting, they jerked the ranch wagon into a lurching run. They topped the grade, and Jay could hear Saddlepack's profanity floating back as he sawed at the reins, seeking to check the team.

Jay turned grimly to the sack, and bent to lift it. He muttered, puzzled more than ever by its weight.

A sudden suspicion galvanized him. He dragged it off the trail, ripped the burlap with his knife. Potatoes rolled away as he dragged out an iron bound box. He smashed the lid with a rock.

Then he stood staring down for silent seconds. There were half a dozen packets of yellowbacks in the box. But mainly it was filled with dull yellow bars of metal.

Gold bullion!

"That lying rat," Jay suddenly spat, fury sending a red haze to his eyes. "Damn him. There's close to three hundred pounds of gold here. A fortune! And Minter must have known it!"

He decided to take the currency and leave the bullion there. Tumbling T riders would be here within two hours in the hope of finding the trail of the lone highwayman, and there was little chance of anyone else noticing the box, with the snow swirling down blindly.

Jay stowed the money in the breast of his mackinaw under the slicker. He heard a sound, started to whirl.

A gun drove a savage lash of flame at him from a boulder thirty feet away. He felt the deadening impact of a bullet in his back. And felt himself plunging with fearful speed down into a black pit.

Jay Tallant collapsed slowly forward on his face across the smashed express box. . . .

WITH cat-like wariness a man in a black slicker came gliding up, his gun ready. It was Jules Duprey, the owner of the Red Rocket. He stood over Jay, the hammer of the gun lifting again for a finishing shot.

Then Duprey shrugged, and holstered the gun. He could see the blood welling from the hole in the back of Jay's ragged slicker. Another bullet seemed unnecessary.

Duprey dragged Jay's limp form to the edge of the bluff and rolled it over. He watched it roll and tumble down a frozen shale slide, and come to rest among scrub brush at the bottom, more than a hunderd yards below.

Moving fast, the gambler brought up Jay's horse, and his own mount. He had brought packsacks for the bullion. Soon he rode away into the cedars, leading Jay's horse, across which the gold was slung.

The snow drifted down silent. It increased to a dense white flood as though the skies meant to bury the Thundercloud range forever. The white blanket soon covered the little frozen blotch beside the trail where Jay Tallant had

fallen. And it also wiped out all tracks.

It began to drift over Jay Tallant's still form, there in the little landslide of dislodged shale that his body had brought down in its descent.

Early, gloomy twilight gathered over the range. The long howl of a lobo wolf ran eerily among the cedars on the bluff. And down in the river flats, the defiant, answering yammer of two coyotes sounded.

The smell of blood rode the snowstorm. . . .

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BUCK SEVIER, heading back to the ranch after riding fence since morning, paused his horse and listened to that long wolf howl as it was repeated. His lean face drew into a listening frown. He had heard a distant, muffled gunshot from the direction of the red shale bluff a few minutes earlier.

He thought of the hot supper Bessie would have ready, then reluctantly pulled his hatbrim lower against the heavy drive of the snow, and swung his mount toward the bluff. He dragged his saddle gun in the hope of getting a shot at the gray loafer wolf which had pulled down one of his calves a few days before.

He veered along the base of the shale bluff, pausing now and then to listen. Twilight deepened, and he finally gave it up. He swung his horse to head back for the ranch.

Then he heard a groan from the brush nearby . . . .

Later, Bessie came racing from the kitchen as her brother staggered in carrying Jay's limp form.

"It's Tallant," he panted. "Found him out there, shot."

She helped lift Jay to the bunk. They cut away his slicker and mackinaw and his shirt. As she did so packets of yellowbacks spilled out on the floor. She looked up at her brother with a startled question in her eyes.

Buck shook his head indifferently, but afterwards his mouth grew tight. He did not mention that Jay Tallant's face had been masked when he found him lying in the snow.

Bessie pushed the money aside without another glance, and, with her brother's help, began working on Jay. They bathed away the dried blood. Her eyes lighted hopefully after a moment.

"Look!" she exclaimed gladly. "That bullet didn't go through him. His heavy clothing turned it in time. It glanced along his shoulder blade. It's lodged just under the skin. An ugly wound, but it was mainly the shock of it that has knocked him out."

Her brother nodded as he helped her with the bandaging. Now and then his thoughtful eyes roved to the money on the floor near their feet.

After a time, Buck gathered up the packets of yellowbacks with a casual air, and thrust them out of sight under the mattress of the bunk beneath Jay.

It was nearly two hours before Jay began to move. With an effort. his eyes opened. He stared dazedly at Bessie who knelt beside him. When he became certain it really was her face, he tried to lift himself from the bunk. She laughed a little, though her eyes became suddenly bright, and held him back.

"Take it easy," she warned. "Buck found you out in the snow. Someone shot you."

Recollection came with a rush. Jay's eyes flashed to Buck who stood across the room, watching him with veiled intensity.

"Where are my clothes?" Jay demanded, forcing himself to a sitting position in spite of Bessie's protest. "That old slicker, the black hat an' the gloves."

"Right here," Buck replied laconically. "An' the money you was carryin' is hid

under your mattress. It fell out as we took care of that bullet puncture."

"Get rid of those clothes," Jay ordered hoarsely. Burn 'em. They're dynamite, Buck."

Bessie Sevier stared at him, then whirled to look at her brother. Something in Buck's eyes sent all color fleeing from her cheeks. She turned again to Jay.

"But I don't understand," she said shakily.

Jay faced her squarely, and there was agony deep in his eyes. "I got that money in a holdup," he stated grimly. "By this time men are hunting for me. The chances are they'll come here to question Buck. I've got to ride before that happens. Don't you understand, now?"

Buck said nothing. He picked up the blood-stained clothes, and turned toward the fireplace.

As he did so the door was thrust violently open. Fremont Tallant, gun in hand, leaped in, snow swirling away from his hat and shoulders. At his heels were Shanty Bemis and two more cowboys, white with snow.

Fremont Tallant saw what Buck had in his hands. His eyes flashed triumphantly. "Drop that slicker, Sevier," he grated. "Lift your hands. I knew from the first that you'd be the man we wanted."

Then Fremont Tallant saw Jay there in the bunk, and he went rigid with shock. As he stared, all the dominant vigor in the man seemed to crumble, leaving him haggard. A grim premonition of the truth laid its heavy shadow in his eyes.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Smoke Sign!

BESSIE SEVIER had stood there ashen-pale against the ruddy firelight. She watched the faces of Jay and his father, and her body stiffened. Instinctively she glided in front of Jay in a fierce, little protecting move.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

Fremont Tallant's voice was a dry, mechanical rattle. "You know what we want. Search the house boys. The gold must be here. And keep Sevier and this —this other man covered."

Jay pulled himself to his feet, swaying a little. "You'll find the bills under this mattress," he remarked coldly. "I hid it there. Buck Sevier and his sister know nothing about this. Buck found me out there wounded, and brought me in."

"And he was going to burn that slicker which he knew would betray both of you," his father returned stonily. "I was convinced from the first that Sevier was behind this. But I didn't expect to find my own—son also guilty."

"Listen to me," Jay cried hoarsely. "I held up the wagon single-handed. I was shot by someone afterwards. Buck Sevier's entirely innocent!"

His father's face was an implacable gray mask. "What did you do with the bullion?" he demanded.

Jay shook his head. "I didn't hold up the wagon for the gold," he remarked. "I wanted cash. I didn't expect to find gold. As I stood over the box someone shot me from cover. The man who did that took the bullion."

Fremont Tallant's face did not change. But his voice broke a little. "I'll appeal to whatever decency is left in you, Jay Tallant. If that bullion isn't recovered at once, the Big Lodge Stockman's Bank will close tomorrow. When this news gets out a run is bound to start. And the bank is in no condition right now to meet a run."

Jay shook his head. "I've told the truth," he said. "I know who—"

Jay believed that it was his brother-in-law, Lang Minter who had shot him. It seemed clear to Jay that Minter, lacking

the courage to perform the hold-up himself, had waited until the deed was performed, then had cashed in on the profits by attempting a cold-blooded murder.

But Jay set his lips against that accusation, as he thought of Jane. He had no proof. It was futile to make an empty accusation. Minter would deny everything, and laugh at him. Only Jane would be the sufferer from such a situation.

It became clear to Jay that he would have to pay the price. "I can't tell you where the bullion is," he said grimly.

Fremont Tallant's shoulders sagged. He turned wearily. "Take them to jail," he said brokenly. "The girl also. Her brother was in on this robbery—and she has guilty knowledge of it."

Jay was stunned. Then he leaped at his father, a choked, furious cry bursting from him. "Damn you!" he shouted. "I *told* you they were innocent. You know they are. You know I'm not a liar. You're taking this chance just to get rid of them."

Jay was pushed back by the cowboys, as his father turned away. "Listen to me," Jay said between clenched teeth. "If you harm the Seviers for this, some day I'll come back to hunt you down, an'—"

"Easy, boy," Shanty Bemis pleaded. "He's your own father—your own flesh and blood."

"My God, Shanty!" Jay panted. "You're not going to let them put Bessie Sevier in a rathole jail, too? She's an angel—do you hear?"

More Tumbling T cowboys crowded in. They pushed Shanty aside and moved upon Buck and Jay who fought like madmen. But all their fighting did no good. They were slugged, carried to the horses and bound hand and foot in the saddles. And Bessie Sevier was forced to mount and ride with them through the thick snow to Big Lodge.

Before dawn a cell door closed on Jay and Buck Sevier. And Bessie was a prisoner in the barred, iron-portaled room in the sheriff's quarters, in another wing of the jail.

THE sheriff brought a doctor to look after Jay's wound. The bullet-shock had passed now, and after the doctor had gone, Jay paced the cell like a madman. Remorse tore at him as he thought of Bessie held in a cell like a common felon. And her brother faced a long term in prison.

"Take it easy, Tallant," Buck Sevier advised repeatedly. "You'll go loco. You're in no shape to keep moving around like that. We're in for it, and might as well get ready to take our medicine. I ain't holdin' it against you, nor is Bessie. Luck broke that way. That's all."

As the morning advanced they heard an uproar break out in the streets. A confused tide of angry voices beat through the stone walls, and over the sound came the roar of six-shooters. Then they heard the distant crash of breaking glass and the sound of splintering wood. Then, after an interval it halted as abruptly as though a curtain had been dropped. Jay listened and heard nothing more from the street. Big Lodge seemed suddenly to have become a tomb.

It was noon before the garrulous old turnkey brought news to the cell.

"You boys sure raised hell," the turnkey growled. "The Tallant bank didn't open its doors this mornin'. When the word got around, a bunch of gents thought it would be a good idea to open the bank with axes. The sheriff tried tuh stop 'em an' got a slug in his laig. They wrecked the bank an' then began huntin' your dad, but they didn't have to hunt far. He come ridin' in from the ranch, hell-for-leather. Right into the midst of them miners an' cowmen whose money

was tied up in the bank. An' he done what nobody else could do. By God, he cooled that mob!"

The turnkey's fingers were trembling as he wiped away cold sweat that came at the recollection. "I thought sure they'd fill ol' Fremont Tallant full of lead. But he set on his horse an' lifted his hand in that old, stern way of his, an' by golly they listened to him. He told 'em he'd pay dollar for dollar. The Tumblin' T is tuh be sold, an' everything else the old man's got will be thrown intuh the pot tuh pay off the depositors. I reckon it'll wreck him."

Jay's lips were white. All this he had brought on his father. He stood at the cell door, staring at a blank stone wall, while the torments of hell ate at his soul. His father a ruined man; Jane with a broken-heart! And most damning of all, Bessie and Buck Sevier branded as criminals.

A moan of sheer agony forced itself through his lips, and Buck Sevier turned away.

Then Jane came to the cell door, and kissed Jay through the bars. Neither in her words or in her eyes was there a hint of reproach.

"What can I do to help, Jay?" she sobbed. "I know you told the truth. But nobody will listen to me."

"Help Buck and Bessie Sevier," Jay said, his knuckles white on the bars. "They're innocent. I love Bessie Sevier —and Buck is white clear through."

He became aware that Buck had moved to his side, and that he and Jane were looking at each other. Tears filled Jane's eyes. Abruptly she turned and fled from the cell room.

Buck walked to the bunk and sat down silently, a queer twist of pain on his lips.

"You know my sister?" Jay asked quietly after a time.

"Yeah," Buck muttered grimly. "I used to meet her on the trail once in a while. Danced with her at the schoolhouse once. I had hoped— Well .... She married Lang Minter."

Jay Tallant cursed as he paced the cell throughout that day. Outside, there were sounds of Big Lodge resuming its normal activity. Fremont Tallant's promise had lifted the specter of ruin from the minds of many men. But night brought no surcease from the black thoughts that tortured Jay. Hour after hour he lay tense and sleepless on the hard jail bunk. Midnight came, and the mocking silence of the stone walls seemed to press in on him. He had to fight the impulse to rise and beat at these walls. Somehow, he had to get Bessie and Buck Sevier out of this.

Buck was silent in the other bunk, but Jay knew that he was awake also. And somewhere inside these gray stone walls Bessie, a prisoner in a cheerless, chill room with barred windows, was haggard, distraught and without hope.

Then Jay's head lifted. He lay taut and listening. Sounds drove in from the lighted jail office beyond the steel door at the front, where a turnkey and a deputy were on duty. There was a crash, a suddenly stifled shout and the muffled sound of leaping boots.

The door of the office swung open, admitting a dim band of light down the line of cells. Masked men came running in, snarling harsh, low-voiced warnings for silence at the four or five other prisoners in the cells. They came to the door of the cage which Jay and Buck occupied. Keys rattled; the slugged turnkey moaned.

Buck and Jay stood side by side against the far wall as masked men looked in at them, guns in their hands. A man chuckled mockingly. "This ain't a necktie

party, but we're takin' you two out of this calaboose."

Jay knew that voice.

BEHIND the mask, through which little wicked eyes gleamed, was the face of Sam Hickman, the former Border outlaw. The man Jay had once sent to Yuma prison, and who had sworn some day to kill him.

"What's on your mind, Hickman?" Jay asked easily. "You're not opening this stony lonesome for me just because you like me."

"Come on," Hickman growled. "Rattle yore hocks. We don't aim tuh linger here all night."

"It runs in my mind that we'd be better off here," Jay remarked.

"Ain't you the ungrateful cuss!" Hickman sneered. "You comin' out of there, or do we have to pack yuh out like cold beef. You too, Sevier. You hombres are worth about a hundred thousand dollars to us, so don't be bashful. You're quittin' this jail whether you want to or not."

Jay and Buck savvied then. They glanced at each other with tightening lips. "You're after that bullion, eh?" Jay said scornfully. "You're on the wrong trail, Hickman. I don't know where it is."

"You can't run that on me," the outlaw growled. "Punch 'em out of there, boys."

Gun muzzles prodded them viciously, forcing them out of the cell. They were marched to the office. Another door opened, and Bessie Sevier ashen and bewildered, was pushed in by two more masked men.

"Damn you Hickman!" Jay growled. "Leave her out of this."

"Figured I'd have a better chance of gettin' the truth out of all three of yuh," Hickman chuckled. Then he gave a signal.

Gags were jammed in their mouths, and their wrists tied. The turnkey and deputy lay bound and gagged on the floor. They'd been sandbagged. The outer silence in the town showed that the capture of the jail had passed undiscovered.

One by one, in the grip of masked outlaws, the two men and the girl were prodded out, and hustled around the corner of the jail into the darkness.

Only the honkatonks and gambling houses showed light against the wintry darkness. It was the slack hour after midnight when bartenders and professional gamblers have a breathing spell before the next shift of miners came from the shafts in the hills to give Big Lodge another spin.

The Red Rocket storm door opened half a block away, lancing a band of light out into the frozen street. A drunken patron emerged and reeled across the wagon-rutted snow. Jay saw him plainly in the honkatonk door for an instant. It was Lang Minter.

Black fury boiled in Jay, bringing him to a stubborn halt. He tried to make Hickman understand that he wanted the gag removed. It was suddenly clear to Jay that the time for silence had passed. He was willing to sacrifice himself to shield his sister from sorrow and disgrace. But not even for Jane, could he sacrifice Bessie and Buck Sevier.

Hickman did not understand. He cursed Jay and shoved him ahead.

Then, from the heavy shadows at a corner hardly two hundred feet away a six-shooter spat wicked red flame. Two shots broke stridently against the keen silence of the night.

Lang Minter, a dark shadow against the snowbound street, paused in his reeling progress, his arms half-lifted. He fell limply into the snow, and a choking death scream dribbled away into silence.

Hickman, with a startled snort, propelled Jay around the corner of the jail

off the sidewalk. Aided by the other outlaw he forced Jay at a run back among the buildings.

But still vividly etched in Jay's memory was the face he had seen plainly revealed over that murderous gun-flash there in the shadows. It was Jules Duprey, the gambler, who had killed Lang Minter—shot him in the back.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### A Drifter Can Die!

HICKMAN'S startled men were already in the saddle, their nerves jumpy. "Somebody got salivated," Hickman panted as he came up. "Wasn't none of our misery, though. A private killin', I reckon. Let's drift."

They boosted Jay into a saddle, and swept down through the dark side lanes. They passed the cottage in which Jane lived, and Jay shot a grim glance at the dark windows. At least, Jane was now forever freed from the duty of remaining loyal to Lang Minter.

They galloped onward through the thinning scatter of shacks and dugouts and away from Big Lodge, into the chill, raw darkness that preceded dawn. Hickman led the way. They swung into the main trail to the hills, which had been churned by ore wagons and jerkline mule teams into a frozen quagmire. After two miles Hickman swung off along a ridge swept clear of snow, the ice-clogged hoofs of the horses leaving little trace on the bare granite surface.

Gray light was beginning to break against the stark rims of the Thunderclouds when Hickman swung them into the lee of a cutbank above a frozen stream. Lodgepoles screened them here, and the foot-deep snow was sullied for the first time by the passage of the horses.

Hickman halted. "We better give the horses a breather," he growled. "We're safe enough. Likely they ain't found them two in the jail office yet, an' they'd have a hell of a time trailing' us down that wagon road. Let's have a drink an' take the gags from these three."

Hickman took a deep pull from a bottle, and grinned coldly at Jay. "Now, jest where did yuh cache that bullion, Tallant?" he asked suavely. "We might as well git that settled while we're waitin' here."

"Turn them free, and perhaps I'll have something to tell you," Jay remarked, indicating Bessie and Buck.

Hickman chuckled and uncoiled a braided quirt. "Damn you, I've waited five years for a chance like this," he grated. "I'll make you talk."

And he laid the lash with all his strength across Jay's face.

The braided rawhide, stiff from the cold, cut to the bone. Blood streamed, and Jay's horse, startled, went to pieces. His wrists tied, blinded and half-dazed by the blow, Jay was thrown heavily into the snow.

Bessie Sevier screamed in horror. "You murderous coward—" Then an outlaw clapped a hand over her mouth.

Hickman dismounted, and stood with thick legs braced, grinning down at Jay. His brutal face was on fire. He waited until Jay had thrown off the first effects of that fall. Jay lifted himself to his knees, and looked at Hickman.

"Now will you talk?" Hickman snarled.

"You heard my terms," Jay said. "Not until Bessie Sevier and her brother are out of your reach."

Hickman swung the quirt again with an oath. Another raw, bleeding welt stung across Jay's face.

Jay took that blow, and his chill eyes did not change. Hickman lifted the quirt again, cursing, but now there was a helpless, baffled note in the outlaw's raving fury. Sam Hickman had realized that he

could never torture or beat the truth from this inflexible man, whose eyes still carried the bleak promise of death.

Hickman stayed that third blow then. A cunning light grew in his eyes. Suddenly he turned to Bessie Sevier who was sagging, half-fainting from horror, in the saddle.

He dragged her down into the snow. "Maybe you'll talk," he rasped. "You know where Tallant an' yore brother hid that bullion. Don't be stubborn—it ain't worth it."

Jay came to his feet, and though his arms were bound, he leaped at Hickman like a maddened wolf. Hickman, guffawing knocked him down with a fist.

"How about it?" he demanded, his fingers biting into Bessie's wrist.

"I'll tell," she panted. "Anything—anything! Only leave him alone."

The big outlaw guffawed in triumph. "You're showin' some sense, sister. Let's hear it."

Bessie looked at Jay, her eyes imploring silence. "I'll tell—if you'll turn my brother and Jay Tallant loose," she said grimly.

Hickman stared, then seized her furiously. "Yuh damn little fool," he snarled. "I ain't makin' bargains with any of yuh. Stop stallin', before I—"

Jay had come to his feet. He looked at Bessie. "It's no use," he said. "Let go of her, Hickman. She doesn't know anything about the gold. Neither does her brother. That's the truth, and I'll prove it to you."

Hickman eyed him suspiciously. "Keep talkin'," he growled.

JAY stood silent a moment. He understood clearly that it was futile to bargain with Hickman. The big outlaw did not dare release any of them, for he knew then that he would never be safe from vengeance. There was only one faint hope —to stall Hickman as long as possible in the hope that something would turn up.

Posses would be hunting them soon. It would be better to return to jail than remain in Hickman's hands. Better for Bessie Sevier, at least.

"I never had the bullion," Jay said. "But I know the man who can tell where it is."

Hickman began a scornful snort, then eyed him doubtfully. "Who?"

"Jules Duprey," Jay answered.

Hickman's scowl grew blacker. "What're yuh talkin' about? Where does that card shark figure in this?"

Jay shrugged, and glanced at Bessie Sevier and her brother. "Listen: It was Duprey who killed that man in Big Lodge tonight as we were coming out of the jail. Do you know who he murdered? It was Lang Minter, cashier in the bank."

Jay paused. "Lang Minter was my brother-in-law—a selfish, yellow rat! He was married to my twin sister, and made life a hell for her. I found him playing a stiff stud game with Duprey and a bunch of card slicks. Minter was short in his accounts at the bank, as a result, and faced exposure."

He looked at Bessie. "He planned to rob that ranch wagon himself. But he's the kind that would have murdered the boys on the wagon to cover his tracks. I think a lot of my sister. I didn't want the man she had married to end his life on the gallows. So I agreed to stick up that wagon.

"I took the money, and was going to leave the gold. Someone shot me then. I believed it was Minter, who followed me, and left me for dead when he took the bullion. Now I have a hunch it was Duprey. Minter probably saw his chance to get rich at my expense, and talked Duprey into following me. I suppose they were to split up the profits. Duprey isn't that kind. He silenced

Minter permanently last night. And he's the only man alive who could know where that bullion is."

Jay's voice trailed away into silence. He could see Bessie's lips trembling. The way she looked at him suddenly sent an exalted, purifying flood through Jay Tallant. Understanding was there in her eyes, and a sad tenderness for him.

Sam Hickman stood eyeing him, thinking. "Damned if you haven't got me believin' you!" he finally growled.

He looked around at his men. "What do you think?"

A murmur of assent went around. One slit-eyed outlaw spat. "I say we better fog along," he muttered. "A posse will be roaming around here before long. We can grab Duprey tuhnight, an' I reckon we can make him talk!"

"Keno!" Hickman nodded. He eyed Jay. "We'll take the gal with us. But I don't see no reason for botherin' with these other two no longer. An' I ain't forgot who it was that sent me to that hell-hole in Yuma. I've dreamed more'n once of how you'd look, Tallant, as I sent a bullet into yore guts. Now I'll find out."

Sam Hickman raised his gun.

## CHAPTER NINE

### An Outcast Rides Home

HE MEANT to murder Jay in cold blood. Bessie uttered a faint, choked cry and tried to hurl herself from the saddle at him, but she was too far away.

Then a harsh, toneless voice, spoke from the rim of the low bluff above them.

"Look up here, you devil."

The outlaw whirled and stared up at a man on the rim. Fremont Tallant, his face stern and gray, peered down over the sights of a six-shooter.

Hickman, with a curse swung his gun. Then from Fremont Tallant's hand came a roaring gust of powder flame. The bullet took Sam Hickman squarely between the eyes, smashing the life from him even as he stood there. His gun exploded as he went down, twitching in the death throes.

With frenzied curses the remaining five were drawing and leaping from the saddles. Fremont Tallant fired twice more with methodical speed. An outlaw toppled from the saddle with a groan. A second man who had leaped to the snow was hammered back as though felled by a sledge.

Three guns roared at the head and shoulders there on the bluff a hundred feet away. Fremont Tallant staggered.

And now a second gun spoke on the bluff at a point a dozen feet to the right of the old grim cattleman. An outlaw dropped with a smashed shoulder.

Fremont Tallant steadied, and lifted his gun again, bearing his sights down on the remaining two who were retreating toward the brush, seeking cover. Relentlessly he shot one down.

The lone survivor turned at bay. Half-sobbing he crouched, steadying his aim with cornered desperation on the merciless avenger there on the rim. Again that second gun spat from the snowy rim. The last of the Sam Hickman outlaw bunch took a staggering step, and plunged forward on his face.

It was over. Six men, dead, dying or wounded lay in the blood-stained snow there. And Fremont Tallant slowly crumpled to his knees.

Jay saw the jumper-clad form of his sister leap from a prone position on the rim, and run to his father's side. "Jay," she screamed at him. "Dad's been wounded!"

Somehow, with his bound hands, Jay scaled the cutbank. And Bessie and Buck Sevier were at his heels. Fremont Tallant lay in the snow, his head in Jane's

lap. She was trying to stem the gush of blood from a wound in his chest.

"I saw those masked men galloping past the house with you three," Jane panted hurriedly. "Dad was staying there at the house with me. We got horses and followed. We didn't have time to bring any others to help. Oh, Jay! He's dying."

Buck Sevier had knelt beside Jane. "Yore dad's been hit hard," Buck muttered. "Drilled clean through the body, but I don't believe it got his lungs. Cut us free, Jane. Our hands are tied. Yuh'll find a knife in my pocket."

Fremont Tallant's eyes opened. He looked only at Jay. The austere hardness had melted from his face. There was a plea for forgiveness in his eyes.

"I heard," he gasped haltingly. "I heard why you did it. The blame is mine. I don't deserve to have as fine a son as you. Can you forget the fool things I did, Jay? I've been so narrow, so blind I made my own children fear me—made them afraid to come to me with their troubles. Unable to turn to me in their hour of need, and ask for help."

Jay took his father's hands. "You're talking of things that never existed, dad," he said. "I've come back home. You're not going to die—we're all going to start to live again!"

Fremont Tallant smiled. Jay arose. "I'll go to Big Lodge and bring a doctor and a wagon," he said.

Buck Sevier looked at him, then looked closer, his eyes sharpening. He rose. "I'll drift along with him, too," he said. "I reckon you two girls can manage."

It was Fremont Tallant who understood. He smiled a little. "May God protect both of you!" he said. "Sevier, I have been your enemy. I deserve your scorn and contempt. This isn't your fight now. You owe no such debt to us."

Buck looked at Jay, and then his glance strayed to Jane. "Maybe I'd like to make it my fight, too," he said.

Bessie and Jane comprehended then. They both knew that the two grim-faced men meant to find Jules Duprey after they had started help on the way to this blood-stained spot. A fearful protest leaped into their eyes, but knowing how useless it was, they remained silent.

THE two men came into Big Lodge on lathered horses. An excited knot of men milled around the front of the jail where a deputy was organizing a posse.

They pulled up their horses, and the crowd stared in frozen amazement as they were recognized. The startled deputy made a motion toward his gun.

Jay shook his head. "Never mind the gun," he said. "Round up a couple of doctors, and some wagons an' ambulances. You'll find Fremont Tallant wounded up along Paint Creek, about half a mile this side of Smoke Butte. And half a dozen dead an' wounded outlaws. The wounded might be able to tell a lot about some of these recent holdups."

They rode on toward the Red Rocket. The deputy, dumbfounded, hesitated a moment, then followed on foot. Jay punched open the door of the Red Rocket and strode in, with Buck at his heels.

At this hour the honkatonk was quiet. Most of the gambling tables were covered. A freeze-out poker game was still going down the room. Not more than a dozen patrons were scattered around.

An armed look-out man looked at them, then turned hurriedly toward a rear door.

"Hold it," Jay said. "Don't bother to tell Duprey we're here. We'll do that."

The paid fighting man paused an instant, weighing his course. He decided to fight, and dug for his gun. Jay shot him, walked down the length of the room, and stepped over his body.

As he reached for the knob on the door, a six-shooter crashed beyond it, and the slug came through the panel, throwing resinous splinters into Jay's face.

Behind him he heard Buck's gun let go, followed instantly by the deafening crash of a shotgun. The buckshot ripped a hole in the roof.

Buck's voice came reassuringly. "It was the barkeep. I got him. All clear at yore back, Jay."

Jay threw his weight at the door, and the lock snapped. As he drove in, a gun gushed flame at him from the darkened room.

He glimpsed a shadowy form, and triggered twice. He could almost feel the impact of his bullets in a man's body.

*"Sacré!"* a blood-choked voice gasped.

Jules Duprey, in a jacket of fox fur, lay gasping out his life on the floor. He lay in front of a little iron safe, which stood open. At Duprey's feet were two bars of bullion, and in the safe were more. He had been storing them in leather packsacks.

The gambler looked up at Jay with a twisted smile. "I kill you, and you do not stay dead. Now you kill me. I make the mistake when I do not fire the *coup de grace.*"

Jules Duprey died there, smiling mirthlessly at life and death. A gambler's smile frozen on his thin lips.

* * *

THUNDERCLOUD range was greening up once again. Spring, with all its soft promise of new life, soothed the land.

Fremont Tallant, winning his way back to health after a long fight, sat on the deep porch of the big Tumbling T ranch house, rolling a cigar in his teeth.

He watched the chuckwagon rumble in from the calf roundup, and there was deep, vast pride in his eyes as he followed the movements of the sinewy, red-headed rider who came at the head of the noisy cowboys.

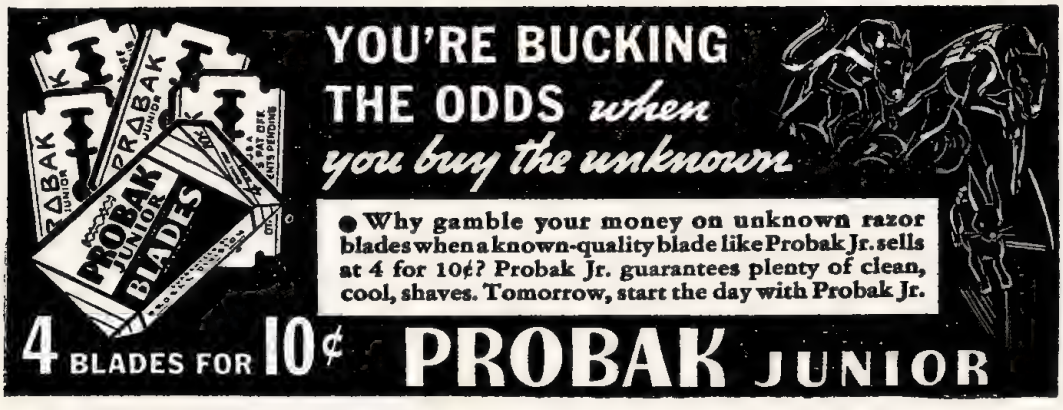
"Bessie!" he shouted into the house. "Here's your husband."

He chuckled as his new daughter-in-law came eagerly to his side, to rest a hand on his shoulder while she shyly awaited the care-free rusty-haired cowboy who strode toward the house to take her in his arms.

And through the balmy dusk he watched two lingering riders, on slow-moving horses, crawling reluctantly toward the house. They rode close together. He knew that out there, Buck Sevier was holding Jane's hand.

"There's going to be another wedding before long," he said aloud. And his weathered, rock-like face softened into a smile of peace and contentment.

THE END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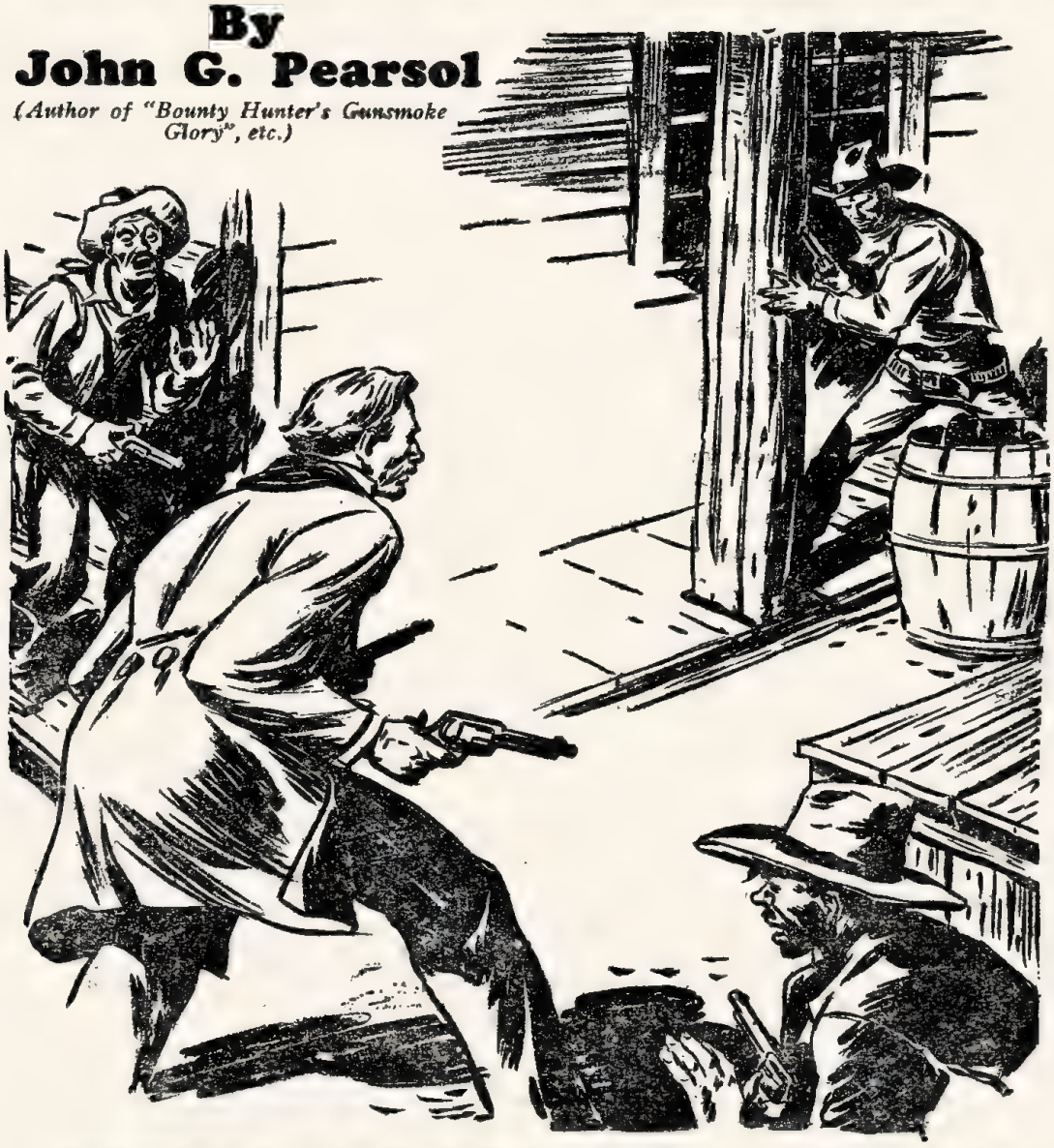
# Miracle in Gunsmoke

By
**John G. Pearsol**
*(Author of "Bounty Hunter's Gunsmoke Glory", etc.)*



**To his neighbors, Cole Randall was the finest man they had ever known—successful, generous and a good man to call friend. Yet down in his heart, Cole knew how wrong they were. His true brand would yet bring those who trusted him to ruin and desolation—unless he could save them by a last-chance gunsmoke miracle!**

COLE RANDALL sat in his big chair near the front window of the bank, looking out at the fine, powdery dust in Galetta's street. That dust was hock deep, and growing deeper. Cole Randall smiled as he looked at it and at the white-hot, brazen ball of sun that caused it. The sun was doing

what Cole Randall wanted it to do. It was burning out grass, drying up water holes, making things plenty hard for these ranchers in Galleta—and making things easier for Cole Randall.

In just a few months now Cole Randall would foreclose some of the mortgages he held. He'd make plenty out of these three years of dry weather. He'd have money, power—power he hadn't had six years ago, when he had needed it so badly.

Six years ago Cole Randall hadn't been a banker. He hadn't even been Cole Randall. He'd been Poke Bradley, an honest, hard-working young fellow, helping his father on a little ranch in Texas. There had been a long dry spell then, like there was now. There had been a skinflint banker with the law behind him. That banker had taken the ranch away from Poke Bradley's father, because of a measley thousand dollar mortgage which the old cattleman couldn't pay. That blow had sent Poke Bradley's father to an early grave.

Then, when he'd seen his father beaten, broken, crushed by defeat, young Poke Bradley had decided that money was the important thing, the thing that counted above all else. He had decided that he would get money, and that he wouldn't be particular as to how he got it.

Young Poke Bradley started out to find somebody who could show him the way to easy money. He found Jim Peters, an outlaw. Jim Peters was a wonder at opening bank vaults. But Jim Peters turned out to be not so smart in other things, not so clever as Poke Bradley. Or maybe he hadn't been as bitter. For after a few months, when Poke Bradley decided that he and Jim Peters had robbed enough money to buy a big ranch, to get into the big coin, Bradley sent Jim Peters up a blind canyon where a posse waited. Jim Peters went to jail for five years, and Poke Bradley took the money and rode fast and far.

But Poke Bradley didn't buy a ranch. He decided to buy a bank. He remembered how that banker back in Texas had reached out and taken his father's ranch so easily. He decided that he'd do the same thing. To Poke Bradley it seemed that a banker and a bank robber had about the same code.

That had been five years ago, and now Poke Bradley, outlaw, didn't exist anymore. In his place was Cole Randall, banker. And Cole Randall was sitting pretty, waiting to clean up, like that other banker had cleaned up. But Cole Randall had one worry. He was thinking about Jim Peters, the gent he'd double-crossed six years before. Just about this time, Jim Peters would be getting out of jail, looking for Poke Bradley, with a gun in his hand. . . .

Cole Randall wanted to run now, to tell these ranchers to pay up or get out. He wanted to collect and make a getaway. But the time wasn't quite ripe. He would have to stay for a while, if he wanted to keep folks thinking that he was a fine fellow, big-hearted and generous. He had to make them like him—if he wanted Dora Wright to like him. Dora Wright was mighty important to Cole Randall now. She was the first girl Cole Randall had ever loved.

He had waited a long time, and now he was beginning to get someplace at last. Everybody in Galleta liked him. They invited him into their homes, asked his advice, and thought he was their friend. Even Dora Wright stopped and talked to him on the street now. She liked him. She'd smile at him. But she smiled only with her lips. Cole Randall wanted her to smile with her dancing grey eyes, like she smiled at young Tom Drake whenever she looked at him.

Tom Drake was young, cocky and full of confidence. He had a fiery temper, and

he was fighting like the very devil to make his ranch a paying one. Cole Randall was thinking of Tom Drake now as he sat in the chair in his office, he was thinking of Drake's temper, of his ranch, of how, maybe, Cole Randall could make something happen to Tom Drake.

COLE RANDALL watched an old man, a dusty, straight-backed figure, coming into the bank. That was old man Bleasley. Randall knew what Bleasley wanted, and he knew what he was going to tell the old man.

"I'm sorry," Randall said after he'd listened to the old man's story. "I know you've lost a lot of cattle, and I'd like to help you. But I have more paper than is good for the bank. I have to have my money."

Old man Bleasley sighed. His lips seemed to lose some of their color. "I guess I'm through, then," he said dismally, "Wiped out, after a hell of a long battle."

Cole Randall watched the old man leave the bank, his back not quite as straight as it had been. Somehow, old man Bleasley reminded Cole Randall of his father. Then he scowled. He told himself that he couldn't afford to be sentimental. He had to be hard, like that other banker had been.

Tom Drake had a note coming due pretty soon. Randall had to turn Bleasley down if he wanted to turn Tom Drake down. He had to give the impression that the bank was hard up. He couldn't afford to have Dora Wright think that he was showing any partiality.

Cole Randall couldn't afford to be sorry for anybody, no matter if they did remind him of his father. He had to make folks figure that cash was scarce, that the drought had hit the bank. Tom Drake would hear about Bleasley losing his place. Then Tom Drake would come in, anxious to know what was going to happen to him.

Tom Drake did come in.

"Listen," he said to Cole Randall. "I hear you refused old Bleasley a renewal. Does that mean that you'll wipe me out next month?"

Cole Randall didn't say anything at first. He looked at the tall, blond figure before him, at the cocky slant of Tom Drake's big hat, at the silver conchos on Drake's belt. Those silver conchos seemed to belong to Tom Drake, to emphasize the flash, the confidence and swagger of him.

"Wipe you out?" said Cole Randall. "I wouldn't put it that way. I have to have my money, but I don't want to wipe anybody out."

"Then why do it?" asked Drake directly. "You don't *have* to."

Cole Randall smiled, tolerantly. "I see you don't know much about the banking business," he said. "You think all a bank has to do is dish out money and never get it back. This dry spell has made folks take their money out of the bank and not put it back again. I have to have cash or close up. Do you sabe that, Tom?"

"Sure, I sabe," said Tom Drake. "I sabe you loaned me money when things were good, and raised the ante just a year ago. And now, since you got me over a barrel, you're gonna shove me out in the cactus!"

THE expression on Cole Randall's face didn't change. Even the sorrowful look in his deep-set eyes stayed there. He reached down under his desk, brought up a canvas sack and laid it on the desk top.

"You see that?" he asked Tom Drake.

"Sure I see it," said Drake. "What about it?"

"There's ten thousand dollars in that sack," said Randall. "I'm taking that over to Cottonwood tonight. I'm loaning it to the bank over there, to keep them from

going under. That's how the banking business is these days."

A look of amazement spread over Tom Drake's face. He stepped over close to the desk and pointed a long finger at the canvas sack.

"You mean you're taking that much money to Cottonwood," he said tightly, "when your own home folks are up against it? Ten thousand for strangers, but not a dime for us. Is that the idea?"

"You don't understand," said Randall. "I *have* to do this. They'd do the same for me. It's—it's ethics."

Tom Drake opened his mouth again, but didn't say anything. He stepped over closer to Randall and Randall stood up.

"I get it now," Drake said finally. "Bankers stick together—like wolves stick together! You stick together so you can be strong enough to pull the little fellow under!" Drake took a quick step forward. "Ethics!" he snorted. "Here's what I think of your ethics!"

Young Drake's arm shot out. His fist drove straight for Randall's jaw, but it didn't land. Cole Randall rolled his head sidewise, let Drake's fist whiz past his face, and Drake fell against him, propelled by the fierce energy behind the blow. Then Randall pushed hard with his left hand. His right swung up, smacked against Drake's jaw. Drake went limp as he sagged back. He stumbled awkwardly over a chair, fell to the floor and lay still.

Cole Randall was blowing on his knuckles, eyeing Drake there on the floor, when Sheriff Jim Matson came into the bank, out of breath from his run across the street.

"What's wrong, Mister Randall?" he asked. "I saw Tom Drake take a swing at you, from across the street. What's the trouble?"

"No trouble," said Randall. "Nothing much. Drake just lost his temper. Mebby you better see if he's hurt."

Young Drake sat up as the sheriff bent over him. He glared at Cole Randall, as the sheriff helped him to his feet. He put his big hat back on his head again, and shook off the sheriff's helping hand.

"In my estimation you're still a skunk, Randall!" he flared angrily. "Mebby if I'd go get a gun you'd be as handy with that as you are with your fists!"

"There'll be no guns, Tom," the sheriff told him flatly. "You go home and cool off. If I see yuh with a gun on today, I'll jail you!"

Young Drake stomped out without saying anything more. The sheriff followed him, then stuck his head back in the door.

"You have to be careful how you handle Tom Drake, Mister Randall," he said. "He's a fine boy. They don't come any better. But he's got a hell of a temper."

"I'll be careful," said Cole Randall.

Randall watched the sheriff go back across the street to his office, then he picked up the overturned chair and set it back up on its legs again. He looked down at a little shining object on the floor where the chair had been. He stooped, picked it up, smiled when he saw what it was. It was one of the silver conchos from Tom Drake's belt. . . .

A BIG, long-legged, deep-chested bronc was tied at the hitch-rail in front of the bank. It belonged to Cole Randall.

Inside, in the dark of his office, Cole Randall was sitting, looking up the street toward the Dutchman's saloon. He sat there unmoving, silent, till the saloon doors opened and Tom Drake came out. Tom Drake had been in the Dutchman's since early afternoon, drinking whiskey and telling everybody what he was going to do to Cole Randall. Randall had heard people talking about it as they went past the bank.

Cole Randall smiled as he watched Drake mount and ride out of town. He

looked over at the sheriff, saw that the sheriff, sitting on his front step, had watched Tom Drake leave town. Randall had wanted the sheriff to see Drake leave, just that way.

Randall now picked up the little canvas sack from off his desk, and went out of the bank to his bronc. He mounted, cut a big circle in the street and stopped over in front of the sheriff.

"Well," he said. "I'm leaving."

"Leaving?" asked Sheriff Matson.

Randall nodded. "Taking that money over to Cottonwood," he said. "I'll be back in about four hours."

Matson nodded, then peered closely at Randall. "You don't have a gun," he said. "Mebby I better go with you."

Randall laughed. "That won't be necessary. Nobody knows I'm taking it except you—and Tom Drake."

Then Cole Randall rode out of town, down the same road that Tom Drake had taken.

In an hour he rode back again, came into Galleta on a winded, sweat-streaked bronc, and pulled up in front of the sheriff's office.

"Sheriff!" he called to Matson. "I've been robbed!"

"Robbed?" the sheriff repeated excitedly, as he came out on the porch. "Who? Where—?"

"About four miles out, at the bend in the trail." Randall waved his arm vaguely. "I couldn't see who it was. He stood in a clump of manzanita and told me to drop the money sack. I didn't have a gun, so I dropped the sack and came on back."

"So he told you to drop the sack," the sheriff said thoughtfully. "Than he knew you had a sack. Somebody—" Matson stopped, looked thoughtfully up the road.

"I didn't think anybody knew," Randall said regretfully. "I thought I was safe enough."

The sheriff started walking toward the alley where he kept his bronc. "Come on," he said to Randall. "Show me where this happened."

The news traveled like a wind-spread grass fire. By morning, talk of the robbery was on everybody's tongue. They talked about who did it, some of them guessing that maybe it was done by a gent who called himself Texas Jack, an outlaw supposed to be operating in that county. But a few of the folks around Galleta remembered what Tom Drake had said that afternoon in the Dutchman's, for they came to Randall, asking him in a veiled sort of way if the bandit looked anything like Tom Drake.

The talk about Tom Drake pleased Cole Randall. But the talk about the outlaw, Texas Jack, didn't please him. That unknown name made Cole Randall wonder, made him worry. Somehow, for no reason at all, Cole Randall didn't like the sound of that name. What if Jim Peters had changed his name, like Cole Randall had changed his. What if this Texas Jack fellow *was* Jim Peters. Maybe he would come to Galleta, looking for Poke Bradley. . . .

Later that day the sheriff rode into town with Tom Drake beside him. Folks watched as the sheriff took young Tom Drake directly to the jail. They noticed that the sheriff had a little canvas sack in his hand, like the one Cole Randall had lost.

Cole Randall sat and watched from his chair near the front window of the bank. He watched the crowd gather about the jail. Then he saw the sheriff come out alone, push his way toward the bank, still carrying the sack in his hand.

Cole Randall didn't move. He waited for the front door to open, waited till the sheriff came in and threw the canvas sack down on the desk.

"There's your money," Sheriff Matson said.

Cole Randall looked up, his eyes inscrutable. He didn't seem to care about getting the money back. He seemed more concerned about the man accused of stealing it.

"I saw you ride in," he told the sheriff. "But I can't believe Tom Drake would do a thing like that. Was it—was it really Drake?"

"It was Drake," said Matson regretfully. "I found the money in his barn. It was him all right."

Cole Randall shook his head. "I don't understand it," he said slowly. "Why did he do it? What made you suspect him?"

The sheriff reached into his vest pocket, pulled out a silver concho and held it up for Cole Randall to see.

"This concho off of Drake's belt," he said. "I found it at the bush where you said the bandit stood. Then I followed tracks from there to Drake's place. They led right to his barn. Tom was there, asleep, still sort of drunk from last night. He had a concho off of his belt and the money in his barn. So—" The sheriff stopped, as though nothing more needed to be said.

"It looks bad," sighed Cole Randall. But he was thinking all the while that it didn't look bad at all. It looked good. It looked like Tom Drake was going to jail. . . .

IT LOOKED even better to Cole Randall on the day of Tom Drake's trial. The courtroom was full of people. Sheriff Matson was there, and a lawyer from the insurance company. Dora Wright was there too, her eyes red, as though she'd been crying.

There was a very regretful look on Cole Randall's face as he sat there, close to Dora Wright. Folks who looked at him thought that he was taking it pretty hard. But they didn't see why he should feel so bad about sending a man to jail who had robbed him; unless it was just that a good fellow like Cole Randall would feel bad about sending anyone to jail.

Sheriff Matson told what he knew, about the fight in the bank, about seeing Tom Drake ride out of town just before Cole Randall left with the money. Then he told about finding the concho from the belt, and about finding the money in the barn. Then he looked at Tom Drake as though he wanted to ask him why in hell he would do a thing like that.

A witness repeated the things Tom Drake had said in the saloon. He said Drake had boasted that if Cole Randall wasn't careful that something might happen to him. It looked bad for Tom Drake. It looked worse when Cole Randall had to admit that Tom Drake and the sheriff were the only two he'd told about taking the money over to Cottonwood.

"But that don't prove anything," said Cole Randall. "Nothing proves that Tom Drake stole that money from me."

Folks looked at him strangely. That was a hell of a thing for Cole Randall to say.

"How about the concho off of Tom Drake's belt?" asked the prosecutor. "Doesn't that prove anything?"

Cole Randall shrugged, and looked helpless. "Well, what if it does?" he said defensively. "I've always figured that a man is entitled to one mistake in his life. I have the money back. Nobody has lost anything. I'm willing to forget it—to drop the charges."

Cole Randall heard the gasp of astonishment that swept across the room. He had expected that. The idea of a banker being so soft hearted that he wanted to turn a bandit loose was enough to make anybody gasp. It might even make a girl named Dora Wright think that Cole Randall was a swell fellow. . . .

But Cole Randall knew that the charges

couldn't be dropped. He knew the insurance company lawyer would have something to say about that.

"That's out of the question," said the lawyer.

"Proceed with the testimony," said the judge.

Tom Drake told his story. He looked about him, sort of dazed and bewildered, for a long time before he started to talk. He said he'd been drinking pretty heavy that night. He didn't remember much of what happened. He was sure he had gone straight home and to bed. But he looked like he hardly believed the story himself.

Nobody else believed it either. They found Tom Drake guilty and gave him fifteen years at Yuma.

Cole Randall saw the sudden tears come to Dora Wright's eyes, the awful misery that swept over her face. Somehow, Cole Randall hadn't figured at all, on the way Dora Wright might take this. And he felt a little chill of fear when he saw her coming toward him—fear of what she might say.

"I want to thank you, Mister Randall," Dora Wright said tearfully. "It was fine of you to try to help Tom. I'll always be grateful for that. I—I think you're one of the finest men I—"

She stopped and wept, and Cole Randall looked at her strangely. She was thanking him, telling him he was fine. And all of a sudden Cole Randall knew he wasn't fine at all. All of a sudden he wished that he really was the man this girl thought him to be.

"I guess Tom told you we were going to be married," she finally went on. "I—I guess that's one reason you tried to help him so much. But will you—will you help him more? Please?"

Cole Randall wagged his head dazedly. "Help him more?" he asked. "How can I help him now?"

"Help him get paroled," said Dora Wright. "They will do that, won't they—after a few years?"

A puzzled look came into Cole Randall's eyes. Tom Drake had been sentenced less than thirty minutes ago, yet here was Dora Wright talking parole, talking of it as though she intended waiting for him to get out. She'd wait that long. . . .

"I know Tom didn't know what he was doing that night," she went on. "He'd been drinking. If he really did what they accuse of him, he didn't know that he was doing it. I told Tom I'd wait for him. It will make it easier for him there, knowing that. It will make it easier for him, too, knowing that you will help him. Will you? Can I tell him you will?"

"Yes," Cole Randall found himself saying. "I'll help him. You—you can tell him that, Dora."

WHEN Cole Randall walked away from the courthouse he felt like a man in a dream. Somehow, this didn't seem real to him. He wondered why he felt sad instead of elated, why he felt so sorry for Dora Wright. Never, since his father died, had he felt sorry for anyone.

He went on up the street, opened the door of the bank and went inside. Then he stopped, stood there and stared at a tall, thin, cold-eyed man who stood at the back of the bank, watching him, grinning evilly at him.

"Hello, Poke," said the tall man. "Remember me?"

A chill raced up Cole Randall's back.

"Jim Peters!" he said.

The fellow shook his head. "Not Jim Peters," he corrected. "I've changed my name too, Poke. I'm Texas Jack now, like you're Cole Randall. You ready to die, Poke?"

Cole Randall looked at Jim Peters hard, tried to see a soft spot in the hard shell

of this hate-filled man. "Ready to die?" he asked.

Jim Peters nodded solemnly. "Sure," he said. "You're gonna die. I've hunted a long time and come a long way to kill you. I'll kill you even if I die myself!"

An icy chill came over Cole Randall as he scanned Jim Peters' gaunt face and watched the cold, hungry light in his eyes. Jim Peters meant what he said.

"What do you want to kill me for, Jim?" Cole Randall asked.

Jim Peters laughed. He didn't answer Randall; just stood there and looked at him with eyes that were full of ice and fire and hate. Then he laughed again, a laugh that sent another chill down Cole Randall's spine.

"Don't try anything like that," Jim Peters said finally. "You can't say anything that will stop me. You can't do anything to stop me. You're dead, right now. Just as dead as though you were already buried."

Cole Randall's mind whirled. He'd have to think fast to get out of this. "Listen, Jim," he said. "I didn't know anything about that posse back in Texas. I swear I didn't. I haven't been trying to hide. Not from you. I just changed my name so the law wouldn't get me. I've still got your share of the money. I've been keeping it for you."

"Sure," said Jim Peters, "I know. But you won't have to keep it any more. I helped myself to the whole works while I was waiting for you. You ain't got a dime in that safe now. It's all in that bundle, there on the desk. You won't be needing money anyway, Poke."

Jim Peters stopped talking. His head moved slowly, like the movement of a snake uncoiling. Frozen in his tracks, Randall watched Peters lift the gun from his holster and point it at him. Randall looked down the black hole in the end of the gun barrel. He saw the red flash of fire leap out at him. He felt a sharp pain in his head for just a fraction of a second. Then he didn't know anything.

With fitful slowness, consciousness returned to Cole Randall, and he opened his eyes and saw that he was lying on the office floor. His head ached. He felt dizzy and weak. Faintly, he heard the popping of guns, the slow, continuous rattle of them, from up the street.

Weakly, he rose to his feet, went to the door and looked outside. He saw old man Bleasley, crouched behind a corner, firing his gun at a dobe house up at the far end of the street.

Cole Randall squinted his eyes, passed his hand before them to clear his vision. What was going on? Who were they shooting at? He went out the door and a bullet whizzed past his head, made him run for cover. He turned around a corner, stopped there and looked at the sheriff, a bloody rag about his arm, a smoking gun in his hand.

"Thank God you're all right," said the sheriff. "But be careful. That man is dangerous."

Cole Randall looked blankly at the lawman. "What happened?" he asked. "What's going on?"

"That fellow that creased you and robbed the bank," said the sheriff. "I saw his pony standing near the back of the bank. I wondered who it was. I went over that way and heard a shot. Then I saw him come out. He took a shot at me as soon as he saw me. He had a package of bank money in his hand. I shot back at him, but he had me off balance. We finally cornered him up there in the dobe. He won't get away."

Cole Randall looked up at the dobe again. So Jim Peters was up there, and they had him cornered. Cole Randall sensed the fight that Jim Peters was waging, seeing the shots he threw shots down the street. Jim Peters was licked. But

he'd kill men before they got him. He'd kill anybody he saw . . . .

Old man Bleasley started across the street, running, trying to get to a better spot. A shot cracked out and Bleasley fell, rolled over, got up and limped away again. He grinned at Cole Randall as he came over to where Randall stood with the sheriff.

"The damn skunk pretty near got me," he said. "But don't worry, Mister Randall, we'll get your money back for you."

Cole Randall nodded rather dazedly. It seemed funny. Here was a man he had ruined yet who was fighting for him. Here was a sheriff he had tricked, who was also fighting for him. There were other men, men on whose places Randall had mortgages; men who had every reason to believe that Cole Randall wouldn't renew their paper, men who knew they would soon loose their homes to Randall. But they, too, were fighting for him, and fighting to protect his money.

"I'd like to apologize, Mister Randall," said old man Bleasley, as he tied a rag about the calf of his leg. "I thought for a little while that you was money mad, mebby even—that you wasn't the right kind of a fella. But after hearing you stand up for Tom Drake the way you did, I changed my mind. I don't mind losin' my place to a white man. I know you'd help me if you could."

COLE RANDALL didn't say anything. He just stood there and looked dazedly about him. Bleasley had called him a white man. Dora Wright had said she thought he was fine. Everybody was trying to save his money, money he'd stolen; money that would ruin them. Cole Randall had a sudden, crazy desire to laugh.

A man, a little way off, started to make a dash across the street. The gun in the dobe cracked again, and the man stopped, fell and didn't move.

"That was old man Drake," said Bleasley sorrowfully. "Tom Drake's father."

All this was beginning to make sense to Cole Randall. Standing there, seeing men wounded, seeing men dying for him, was making things look a lot different. It was strange how he saw it now, when he hadn't seen it before.

"An' Tom Drake never stole that money from you, Mister Randall," old Bleasley was saying as he finished tying his leg. "Something happened to just make it look like he did, that's all."

Tom Drake was going to jail, Dora Wright was crying, old man Bleasley was wounded, and Jim Drake was dead . . . . It was hard for Cole Randall to realize that he was responsible for all this, that if it had not been for him, none of it would have happened. Now, Cole Randall was beginning to wonder how he had ever framed Tom Drake as he had, how he had ever put the concho near that bush and hid the money in Drake's barn. He looked at old man Bleasley, smiled a queer, soft sort of smile.

"I know Drake didn't steal it," he said. "In fact, Bleasley, I'm going to prove it."

Cole Randall went back up to the bank again. He wrote a hurried note and laid it on his desk. He went into a closet and got a pair of guns and strapped them around his waist. He was smiling as he went out and walked down the street again. He kept to one side so that Jim Peters couldn't see him. But the others saw him. The sheriff waved to him, motioned to him to go back.

"Go on back," he yelled. "We'll handle this. You'll make a mistake, Mister Randall, going down there."

Cole Randall smiled again. A mistake! That's what he, himself, had said at Tom Drake's trial, that a man was entitled to one mistake. Well, Cole Randall had made two mistakes. He'd made a mistake

when he'd joined up with Jim Peters. He'd made a bigger one when he'd started to ruin the lives of honorable men. Funny, how he felt now . . .

"Jim Peters," called Randall as he neared the dobe where Peters was hidden. "This is Poke. You wanted me, so I'm coming to you. Come out and get me, Jim. This is your last chance—"

Cole Randall stepped out into the street. He saw the door of the dobe open, saw Jim Peters, his face a mask of hate, standing there, guns in his hands.

There was a flurry of motion as Peters swung his guns up, as Randall stabbed his hands toward his holsters. Shots blended in a crackling echo. Then there was quiet, and Cole Randall was on the ground, his fast-glazing eyes watching Jim Peters sink slowly to the earth.

There was a smile on Cole Randall's face as he saw Jim Peters die, as he knew that no other men would die trying to bring Peters down. There was a smile on Randall's face as they picked him up, carried him to the doctor's. A smile that did not come off, even in death.

Everybody wondered about that smile, even after they read the note Cole Randall had left on his desk at the bank.

> Tom Drake didn't rob me. I framed him.
>
> Cole Randall

They had to take Cole Randall's word for it. They believed, readily enough, that Tom Drake had been framed, and they let him out of jail. But hardly anyone believed that Cole Randall had done the framing. He had established himself too well in Galleta for anybody to believe that.

Even Tom Drake didn't believe that Cole Randall had framed him. Nor did Dora, his wife. Dora remembered, with a soft and tender smile, whenever she visited Cole Randall's grave, the time she had asked the banker to help the man she loved. She remembered Cole Randall, standing in front of the court house, looking at her, sorry for her.

She knew. What other reason than to make the woman he loved happy, could Cole Randall have had when he walked to his deliberate death, leaving a confession as absurd as that on his desk behind him . . . ?

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# The Lost Gunman

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Maybe it was because Shoshone looked worried in a way that Dave had never seen him look before. The old man had been silent throughout dinner. Now, drying his scuffed, wet boots with his feet up on the cook stove, he was staring at the glow of the grate, his eyes clouded and anxious. Dave sensed his look would be as near to fear as the oldster's eyes could ever show.

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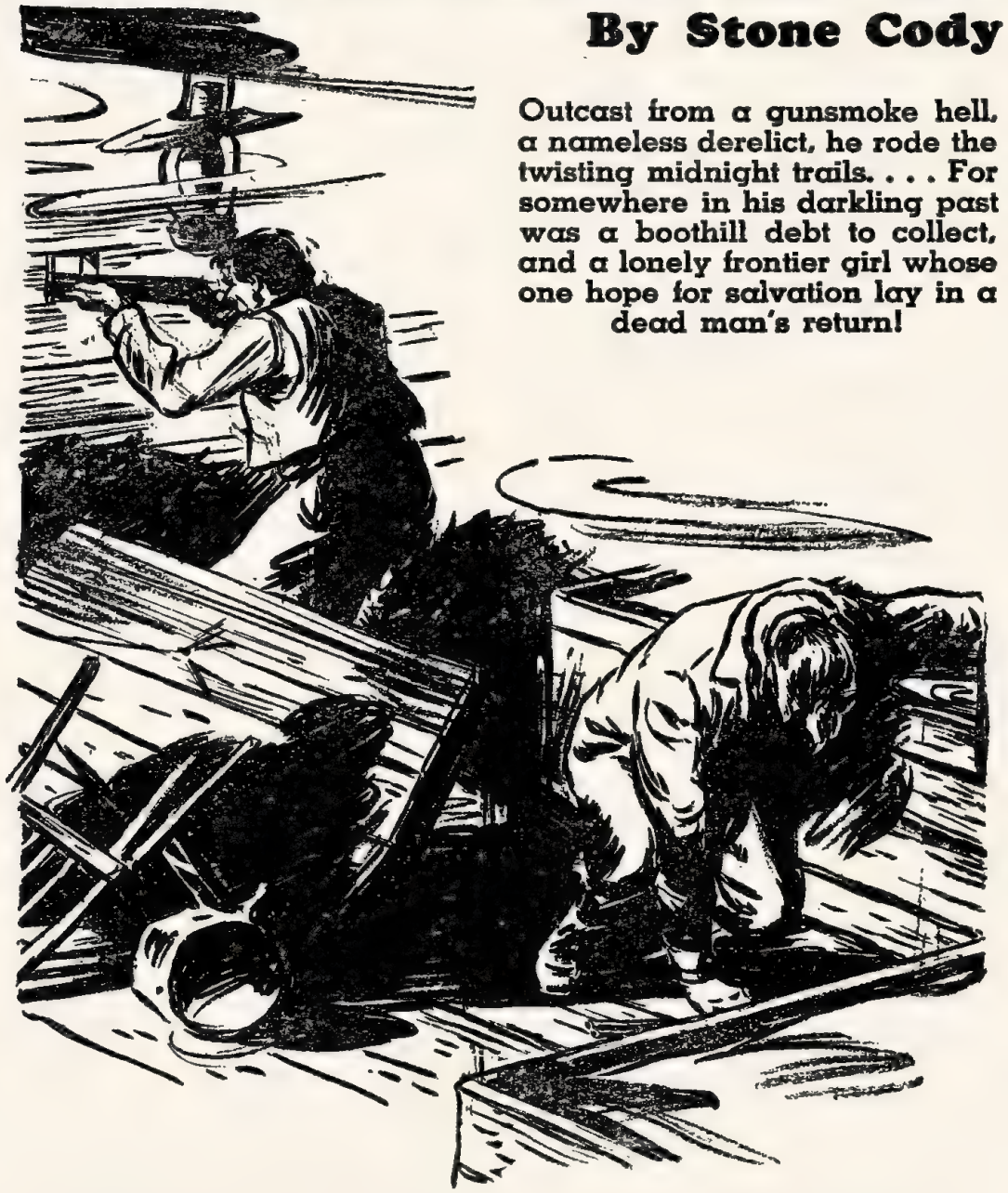
**Gripping novelette of the perilous outlaw trails**

**By Stone Cody**



**Outcast from a gunsmoke hell, a nameless derelict, he rode the twisting midnight trails. . . . For somewhere in his darkling past was a boothill debt to collect, and a lonely frontier girl whose one hope for salvation lay in a dead man's return!**

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He walked over and took a chair near the stove. "What's on yore mind, Shoshone?" he asked, casually, building himself a cigarette. "Briscoe?"

Shoshone Kearney nodded. "In a way of speakin'," he acknowledged. "He's beginnin' to clamp down like he never done before, an' in ways that ain't like him. Yuh see, Wade Brisoce's like all the rest of the old free range men that used to be kings in their day. They're bound to fight the little fellers, like us, that's cuttin' in on their range. New ways rile him. But jest recent, the's been things done that I never would have thought Briscoe'd do. Today, I run into the reason for them things, I reckon—an' it's shore got me buffaloed." The old man knocked the dot-

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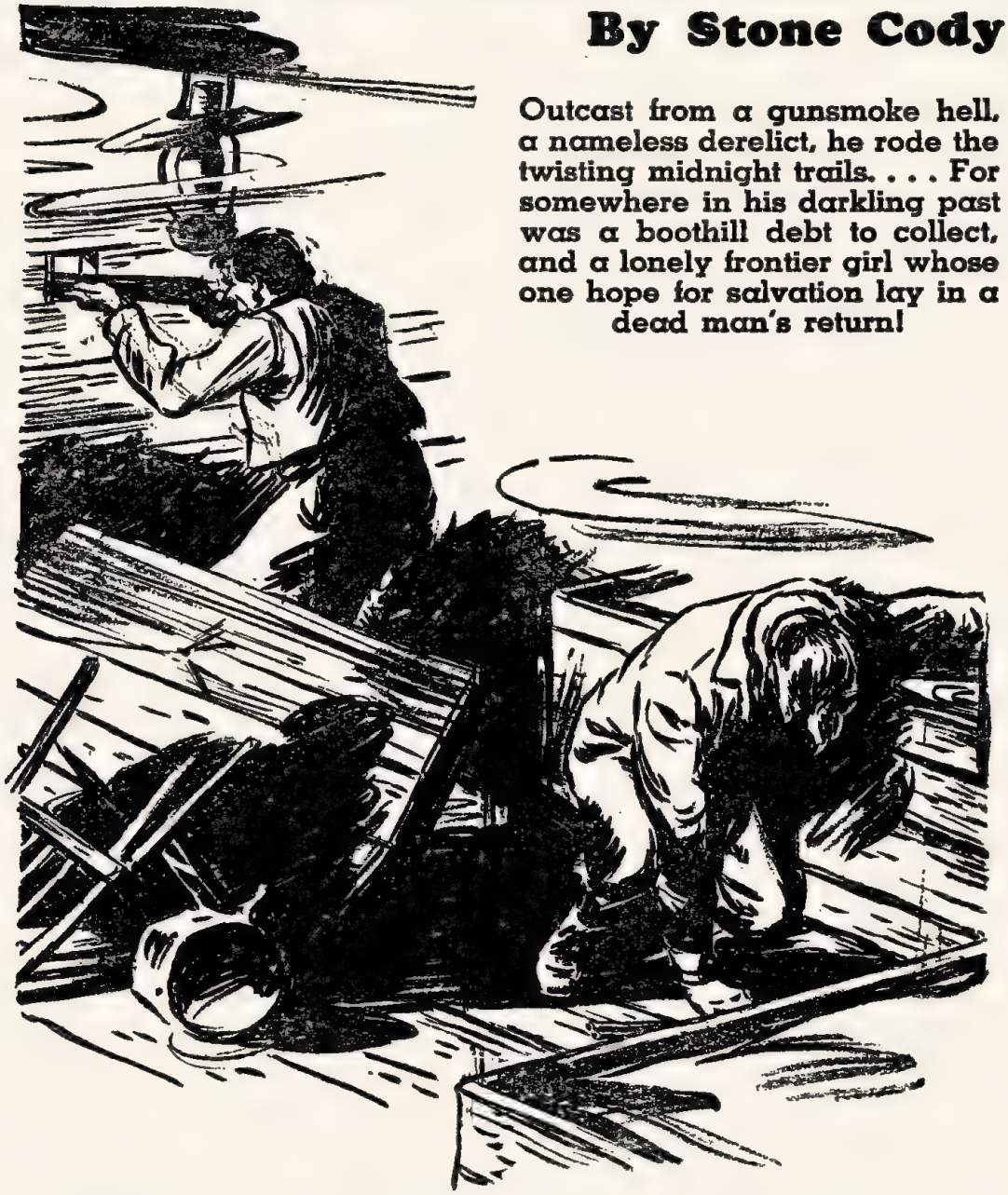

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tle of his pipe against the chair leg. "An' that reason's his new foreman," he said slowly.

Dave glanced up. "I could have guessed it," he said, exhaling a thin blue stream of cigarette smoke. "I seen him the other day. He looks plenty mean, all right. Calls hisself Lash Linton, don't he?"

Shoshone spat disgustedly. " 'Calls hisself' is right! When I fust knowed him he was Cleaver Martin, an' likely that wa'nt his real moniker. He's a killer—an' he's wanted."

Dave's eyes widened. "Well, then—if he gits too salty, yuh kin turn him in," he said.

Shoshone shook his gray head. "I couldn't do that," he said slowly. "I dunno as I ever told yuh, son, that I rode outside the law once myself. It was then that I knowed Cleaver. There ain't nothin' against me—nothin' that folks ain't fergot long since. But once yuh've heered the owl hoot, the's certain ways of thinkin' that sticks with yuh. I couldn't turn in a man I'd once rode with, no matter who he was."

"You tangle with him today?"

Dave asked abstractedly. He was thinking that if it was Linton—or Martin—who was the cause of all the trouble, things might be easy to fix. But Wade Briscoe had been involved, too.

There had been certain meetings out on the hill trails between himself and a high-headed, blue-eyed girl—meetings of which he had said nothing to Shoshone, because of the hostility he knew existed between the oldster and Wade Briscoe. But maybe a word or two from him to Claire Briscoe would do much to straighten things out.

"What I can't make out," Shoshone went on, narrowing his eyes, "is what Cleaver's doin' in a job like this. It's small potatoes for him. He ain't the kind . . . ."

A terrific gust of wind shook the house, the noise of rattling windows and doors almost shutting the old man's voice off. Then the door snapped open, the wind slamming it against the wall.

Dave swung to close it, but checked, staring. Wade Briscoe stood for a moment in the doorway, then strode resolutely to the center of the room. Behind him crowded three men. Dave recognized the new foreman, who called himself Lash Linton—a fleshy, hard-jawed man, with a big, predatory beak of a nose, a thin, cruel mouth and pale gray eyes that stabbed like icicles. The other two he guessed were new hands. One was paunchy and flabby, with a brutal, leering mouth and jaws covered with a kind of reddish hog-bristle. The other was thin, short and kept his dark head thrust forward. Dave was struck momentarily with the snake-like expression lent by his posture.

Wade Briscoe stood with his hands hooked in his belt, water still streaming down from his poncho.

"Kearney," he rasped, "yuh shot six head of my beef today. I come tuh warn yuh—" Then a pistol-shot cut the words off in a deafening blast.

Lash Linton had slid a six-gun out from under his poncho and fired without warning. Dave started for his gun-belt which was hanging on a wall peg. Then he heard Shoshone's grunting gasp, heard Linton's: "Give it to 'em both," and saw that the other two had guns in their hands.

ALL that was vivid in his mind, along with the queerly shocked look in Wade Briscoe's eyes. Then the room exploded into sound again, just as his legs were driving him up from his chair. Something smashed into his chest, slammed him into his seat again.

He thought, "They shot me," not believing it.

The guns kept on going off. Behind him, Shoshone Kearney groaned and his body made a thumping, sack-like sound as it hit the floor. Something hit Dave again. It was a dull, blunt, shocking feeling.

They kept on shooting. Dave was conscious of a sick numbness in his stomach, a queer feeling and weakness in his knees. The floor slanted up toward him. Wade Briscoe was yelling. What was he yelling about? Again that clublike blow at his body. Then the floor smacked him hard in the face. Blackness slid into his mind . . . .

The blackness went away in a raw tide of pain. He lifted his head. The room was empty, the door closed. There was a queer kind of silence under the roar of the rain on the roof.

He got to his hands and knees. Scarlet agony stabbed at his chest and belly. He felt broken inside, incapable of moving, even to letting himself down onto the floor again.

After a moment, he began to crawl to where Shoshone lay. The oldster was lying twisted, half on his side, his head thrown back, his mouth open. He was dead, shot almost to pieces.

An uncontrollable wave of weakness overcame Dave. He fell over sideways, into the puddle which had gathered around Shoshone, his own blood mixing with that of the man who had been the only father he had ever known.

He lay there with flashes of thought and memory ripping through the red haze which was his mind.

He remembered how Shoshone Kearney had taken him, a button of ten, after his mother died. His father had died too early for him to remember him. He recalled days on the trail with Shoshone —the old man's wisdom, his unfailing kindness, the way his eyes would twinkle when he brought the kid some present—gifts which, Dave had long since guessed, Shoshone must have almost gone without food to get. He remembered how Shoshone had worked and saved, to buy this little spread so that they might have their chance together . . . .

Then his mind came back to the blasting, merciless guns, and the brutal, slit-eyed faces of the men who had murdered Shoshone Kearney.

Dave Walker had been shot once through the chest, and another slug had smashed two ribs on his left side. A third had scraped him in the head. He was, from any ordinary point of view, a dead man. Yet the violent current of hatred in him, the vision of those three faces, drove a flood of energy through him, sent him with fumbling hands to buckle on his gunbelt, sent him staggering toward the door.

He got the door open, staggered out into the raging beat of the rain. The fury of the wind almost swept him from his feet.

Behind him the lamp went out. The room which housed the broken body of Shoshone Kearney became a pit, darker than the blackness of the howling night, with the slatting slam of the door a hollow requiem.

Sobbing and cursing, he got to the corral. The horses snorted and milled toward the far side of the pole fence as they scented his blood. He went in, and, by a miracle, got his rope on one of them. Agonized minutes later, he was in the saddle. Half-numb legs raked the mustang with steel. The horse leaped, gathered himself, snorting, and launched off into the night.

Over Dave Walker's mind the red mist settled thicker, so that half the time he did not know where he was or why he should be spurring a frantic horse at a desperate pace through the pitch black night.

The nightmare did not last long. The mustang checked suddenly, snorting, and swerved on the edge of Stroke Canyon. But Dave Walker did not check. His lax body hurtled over. There was a terrific white explosion in his head, like a dozen lightning flashes concentrated, and then darkness, utter and complete . . . .

Only later, somewhere, the hell began again. He was in a wagon bed jolting over rough ground. At every jolt white hot irons of pain stabbed his body and his brain. It was daylight and snatches of voices came to him from behind him. ". . . . just the same as dead . . . . this country . . . . don't like travelin' nesters . . . . what's to prove we didn't shoot him?"

Shoot who? Why? God! Stop this damn jolting! And the lights went out again.

It came back on a wave of agony. He was being lifted, carried somewhere. And now other voices said, ". . . . git him to a town; best thing we kin do fer him . . . . The brakey'll find him."

Later, there was more jolting—rhythmic now, with a sway to it. It kept the pain at an even, unendurable key. But after a little, the pain dimmed, as his mind drifted back into darkness.

Then, inexplicably, there was a room, with morning light in it. A woman was bending over him, her plump, high-colored, good-natured face set in an expression which combined unbelief and pleasure.

"He's awake!" she exclaimed. "Lord! He's goin' tuh pull through, after all! How you feel, son? Do yuh understand me? No, don't talk. Don't say a word. I got to go get the doctor. My, my, me! Won't he be set up! Three solid weeks, an' not a minute of hope in any of 'em."

He could hear her bustling off. He tried to say something to her but could find no voice. He tried to move one of his hands. It lifted infinitesimally from the white texture of the sheet, but the effort was too much for him. He drifted off into his first natural sleep in weeks.

SO, after long weeks of convalescence Dave Walker came back to life, but not to himself.

He learned that the name of the stubby, excitable, kindly old doctor who had saved his life was Vines; the motherly woman whom he first remembered bending over him was the doctor's wife; the name of the town of his re-birth was Gradeville, a junction point on the D.R.&W. But his own name he could not learn. He had forgotten everything that had happened in his life before that moment when he had waked up to find Mrs. Vines bending over him. The past was a blank.

When his strength permitted, he wandered around Gradeville in search of a job. He was still a scare-crow, little more than skin and bones, and there weren't many things he could do. He found himself, embarrassingly, an object of curiosity in town.

It was known that he had come in, unconscious, riding in an empty box car. The fact that he packed a gun, that he had been badly shot up, and that, in addition, he had a broken arm and a fractured skull had made him all the more interesting. But when it was found that he either could not or would not talk about himself the interest began to die down. He was now no more than a kind of town bum.

Somebody dubbed him "The Corp' " and there was some jeering at him, until a couple of the hooraw-artists chose the time of one of his headaches to hooraw him. The Corp' seized a pitchfork which was leaning against the front of the livery barn and attacked with savagery. One of his tormentors got a badly ripped arm

before he managed to out-run his weakened attacker.

The word got around this newcomer was half-crazy and dangerous then, so he was pretty well let alone. He himself was not far from agreeing with the general opinion. He had frequent, violent headaches which drove him nearly out of his mind. And these visitations were followed, as a rule, by a period of morose ill-temper during which he was obsessed by some vague, savage hatred. During these periods he found himself ridden by an almost uncontrollable impulse to kill. To kill!

But he fought his murderous impulses down, and went about the bitter job of getting enough money to keep himself from starving. A saloon keeper finally gave him a job as swamper—his meals, and one dollar a week.

It was there that he developed his first specific hatred, and that his impulse to kill first got the better of him.

He had just taken the spittoons out to clean them and was bringing the last one in when he first saw the man who aroused his insanity. He was standing alone at the bar—a paunchy, flabby hombre, with a brutal, leering mouth and jaws covered with a kind of reddish hog-bristle.

Dave stood staring at him for a long moment, feeling hatred and a red tide of murder flow up in him. He stood stock still, fighting himself. The roof of his mouth went dry. His nails bit into his palms. Then slowly, inexorably, he began to move forward.

He moved with a gliding, feral step, like some great beast of prey. Corky Andrews, the bartender noticed him first. He stared, his hands freezing on the glass he was polishing.

The stranger followed his bugging gaze. His protruding eyes fell on Dave, fixed, then took on a glassy stare, like a man who sees a ghost.

A heavy-jawed, hard-mouthed man, with a crooked nose and piercing gray eyes who was sitting in a corner with his back to the wall, put his hands suddenly on the table in front of him and leaned forward.

Dave saw the fear in the eyes of the paunchy man. He kept moving toward him, slowly, like a lean and deadly cat.

The paunchy man let out a hoarse squawk of fear. "Yuh—yuh—w-where'd yuh come from?" he stammered.

He began to back down the bar away from Dave, yammering: "Listen, I quit him. I didn't want to be in that. He—he had somethin' on me. I—Stay back! Do yuh hear? *Stay back, I tell yuh!*"

His pudgy, shaking hand stabbed suddenly for his gun, flipped up. Dave hurled the brass spittoon and rushed. The Colt bellowed. Then Dave was on him.

He caught the pudgy gun-hand, hooked a foot behind the paunchy man's leg, and they went down in a tangle. Dave got his right hand on the other man's throat. His left still held the gun-hand. Scared eyes bulged out of the hog-bristled face as the paunchy body heaved frantically. But the strength of the devil was in Dave. His pinioning right hand held his enemy down, his left began to twist the gun.

Slowly, inexorably, the muzzle turned toward its owner's head. Dave's hand shifted slightly, so that his thumb could reach the hammer. The paunchy man let out a choking squawk of terror. Then the crash of the shot sounded . . . .

Dave got up slowly. The lust to kill had left him, and a vague concern for what might happen to himself was beginning. But there was no honest regret in him. He stood looking down at the paunchy man, feeling a curious satisfaction.

The man was very dead. The bullet had gone in at the side of the jaw. His mouth

hung open, dribbling blood. He was not pretty to look at.

The heavy-jawed man in the corner slammed the table before him with an open palm. "Keno!" he bellowed. "Fust time I ever see a spittoon take an open pot away from a hawgleg. Son, I like the cut of yore pants."

This was Wolf Murdock, leader of the famous Redrock bunch of outlaws. His praise was something most men would have given a good deal to win. He got up from the table now and walked over to Dave.

"What yuh gonna say when the Law comes?" he demanded shrewdly. "Looked to me like yuh was stalkin' that hombre like a catamount does a weaner calf. An' I kin see it right in that fat bartender's eye that he's gonna tell the sheriff so. That right, Corky?" He roared this last at the bartender, who stammered.

"How'd yuh like tuh quit polishin' them spitoons an' do some ridin' with me?" he grinned at Dave.

Dave stared. "Yuh don't know anythin' about me," he said at last slowly.

"I know yuh've got nerve and that yuh're plenty fast. That'll do to start on. What's yore name?"

"I don't know," Dave told him grimly.

The outlaw whistled. "So you're the feller! I've heard about yuh. They call yuh Corp', don't they? Well, they've made a mistake—it's the other feller that's the corp'." He threw back his head and roared with laughter at his own joke. "Hey, you, Corky, what handle did the late lamented go by?" He indicated the paunchy man.

"I heerd some pardner of his'n call him Blackstrap," the bartender answered. "That's all I know."

Wolf Murdock clapped Dave on the shoulder. "There's a name fer yuh, lean man. The Blackstrap Kid! Come on, we got things to talk over."

So it was that Dave Walker became a member of Wolf Murdock's pack.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Out of the Darkness

FOR a year, he knew the life of the hunted, endured hardship and went hungry, celebrated the fat times in the open towns where the owl-hoot fraternity was not too hardly looked on. During that year he filled out physically, got back the full measure of his lean, whipcord strength, and more besides. His headaches became less violent and less frequent. And the impulse to murder, as though satisfied by that one savage kill in the saloon in Gradeville, ceased to torment him, lay dormant.

It was lucky that it was so. With practice, his natural gunswift had grown into blinding speed and his somber eyes were deadly on a target.

But he was not content. Brooding over the fires of lonely camps, the mystery of his past obsessed him. The day came when he told Wolf Murdock he was quitting, roped out his long-legged grulla from the pole corral, and hit a steady lope for the low country. He was bound for Gradeville. The railroad drew him like a magnet. Somewhere west along the line, his broken and bleeding body had been loaded into an empty box car. In that direction must lie his past—the life-trace of the man he had been.

The rustling of the leaves had carried the word far and wide that the Blackstrap Kid, who rode with Wolf Murdock, was the same crazy man who, memory gone and close to death's door, had highballed a freight into Gradeville, but there was no proof of it. And Wolf had operated chiefly on the other side of the Redrocks. In Gradeville the sheriff eyed him sharply, but said nothing, and Dave did not stay long.

After a visit with Doc Vines and his wife, he rolled his spurs, following the shimmering trail of the tracks. The towns

along the line knew him briefly—a somber-eyed, wedge-built youngster, older than his years, twin guns strapped low on his thighs.

He loafed in the bars, for the most part silent and drinking little, or moving, keen-eyed about the streets. Men remembered him, for the danger that somehow lived below the surface of him, and for the sudden, heartening flash of his rare smile. But nowhere did he meet recognition of his forgotten and dark-clouded past.

So at last they came, the tough, long-legged horse and his tall rider, into Badrock—a town which looked lively enough. Dave reined the grulla through streets teeming with activity. At the livery barn he learned that Badrock was to the junction point for a new branch the railroad was building out into the Cholla Mesa country. Grading had already begun. Land had boomed and business increased. The town was full of construction men.

Dave saw that his horse had a feed of grain, and then he headed out into a street where Irish graders, cool-eyed tinhorns, cowpunchers in from nearby ranges, and swirling riffraff of the boomtown, rubbed elbows with the townsmen. The Blackstrap Kid joined the throng, a light of eagerness in his eyes. It looked as though here, if anywhere, he might strike pay dirt.

Yet day followed day, and the thing he hoped for did not occur. Neither townsman nor stranger looked at him with recognition, furtive or otherwise. Yet stubbornly he stuck to the town.

From time to time, as scraps of talk came to him from all sides, something would tug at his memory. There were moments when he held his breath, with the feeling that at any moment now some recollected event or name would break through the black wall which held his past a prisoner.

Then he met Matt Verne and half a dozen others in the new Junction Saloon.

MATT VERNE was an outlaw and gunman who had ridden with Wolf Murdock. After Dave had left, there had been a fumbled try at a now distant bank and in the resultant shooting a couple of citizens had been killed. Things had gotten hot and the bunch decided to split up for a while until the territory cooled off. The men with Verne were all outlaws, some of whom Dave met along the trails.

"We drifted up here," Matt Verne told him, "because we heerd that gun-hands was bein' hired up around Lariat Crick in the Cholla Mesa country. I dunno jest what it adds up to, but it's a chanct tuh draw fightin' pay while lookin' over some new territory. Whyn't yuh ride along?"

Dave was sitting up with suddenly burning eyes. Lariat Creek! At the name, something had thrust up hard in his mind, as though memory was about to punch through the black curtain.

"Who's doin' the gun-hirin'?" he asked casually.

"That's a funny one!" Verne told him, grinning. "Seems like the's a female gal on the prod, gittin' ready to mess up the hull countryside. Leastways, her an' her partner is. Her name's Claire Briscoe. Mebbe youh've heerd tell of ol' Wade Briscoe that used tuh be the big auger up on that range, before the nesters started in whittlin' him down. Last year, he got hisself tangled with a bad bronc an' is doin' his range-hoggin' in hell. But they say his foreman—a jigger name of Linton—was partners with the ol' hellion, an' now this Linton an' the daughter is runnin' the spread together.

"Natchally, with the railroad going through, land is goin' up, an' they tell it scarey about what Linton an' the gal has been doin' tuh git rid of the little ranches. Seein' they got the dinero to hire guns, it wouldn't be hard tuh guess who was comin' out on top, if it wasn't for the sheriff up there. If the word I

git is right, he packs a mean rattle an' has swore that if the Cross B Outfit—that's Linton an' the gal—jumps the little fellers, he's gonna tear in with a posse an' tromp their ears down, gal or no gal. So the' may not be fightin', which is all right with me, so long as I'm gettin' paid fer it, anyhow."

Dave's pulses were pounding. A hot mist of excitement clouded his mind. Something was trying to break loose there. He sat quiet, his throat dry, just waiting. But the surge of memory receded, and he sat back, feeling suddenly empty of hope.

Nevertheless, when Verne and the others forked leather and headed north the next morning, he was with them. His mouth was a little tight as he rode. He wasn't such a fool as not to know that he was riding into danger—maybe his death. That went, of course, with the job he meant to take, but it went double, with him.

He wasn't forgetting that somebody had once shot him to pieces and then thrown his body into a box car. If the excitement he had felt last night at the mention of all those names meant anything, it meant that he was riding back to his home range. The men who had shot him before would recognize him, but he would not recognize them. If he met one or more of them, the odds would be against him . . . .

THE Cross B ranch was a surprise to the outlaws who viewed it in the sunset light. They had expected a big outfit, from what they had heard and from what they had seen, but not quite this impressive. Ahead, all day, the rearing, freak shape of Cholla Mesa had made a landmark. Now, its tall bulk was a background for the well-kept, spreading ranch house and the outbuildings.

Matt Verne whistled softly. "We been raidin' the wrong country," he grinned, looking back over the cattle paradise which they had been passing through.

Dave—The Blackstrap Kid—made no answer. An obscure excitement had been mounting in him all day. Now it seethed.

The ranch house, shaded by giant cottonwoods and willows, was a huge rambling building. Around it, the bunkhouses, barns, sheds and corrals gave the appearance of a small town as they dipped downward into the yard.

A hard-faced man, with a drooping, tobacco-stained gray mustache came out to meet them.

"We're the men Slag Swanson sent up," Matt Verne told him.

The gray-mustached man nodded. "Got word yuh was on yore way," he gruffed. "Light down. I'll let the big auger know yuh've rode in. He'll want tuh look yuh over. I'm the segundo, Hank Borg. Throw yore cayuses intuh the corral. I'll have the cook rustle yuh some grub."

While they unsaddled, Dave's eyes were busy. The yard was full of men—a score or more of them, idling and smoking in groups. As he turned his grulla into the corral, half a dozen more, who, from the look of their horses, had been riding hard, pounded in. From a nearby bunkhouse he could hear the voices of still others.

It needed only a look to see the character of the hands. Most of them wore two guns and the indelible stamp which marks the professional gun-slinger. And all of them wore the brand of the owlhoot trails plain on them.

Matt Verne grinned. "He can't be gatherin' this kind of army fer nothin'," he murmured. "Looks like them nesters an' their law-dog was gonna run into grief."

Dave became aware that a silence had fallen over the yard. He turned to find himself face to face with a fleshy, hard-jawed man, with a big, predatory beak of a nose, a thin cruel mouth and pale gray eyes that stabbed like icicles.

His air of authority was unmistakable. Dave didn't need to be told that this was Lash Linton, boss of the Cross B.

LINTON had no recognition in his eyes—nothing in his face but a granite lack of expression. By a powerful effort of will, Dave stilled his hammering pulses, and fought back the insane itch to kill which writhed in him. He was no longer the half-crazy wreck he had been that night in a Gradeville saloon when a hog-bristled man had died. He kept his face impassive, his hands still.

"What's yore handle?" Linton demanded in a chill voice.

"The Blackstrap Kid."

Something flickered in the icicle eyes, then was gone. "There was supposed tuh be six of yuh. My tally makes you the seventh. How come?"

There was a hint of truculence in Matt Verne's voice. "I brought him along. I've rode with him an' I'm vouchin' for him. The kid's all right."

A sixth sense of danger stirred in Dave. His glance flicked to the right of him, came to rest on a thin dark gent, who carried his head thrust forward so that it gave him somewhat the appearance of a snake. He was staring at Dave now, with his fixed, beady, snake eyes. He had gun-swift written in the nervous posture of his body.

Again the killer hate churned in Dave, but again there was no recognition in the eyes of the man who watched him. And so far as he knew, Dave had never seen him before.

Lash Linton was speaking. "Come up to the house, you," he said to Dave. "We'll do some talkin'." He turned away brusquely and strode toward the rambling pile of main buildings. Dave followed, his mind whirling.

Before he got into the big living room he was sure of only one thing, and that was that he didn't want to work for Lash Linton. He didn't want any part of him.

Linton stood spread-legged before the fireplace. "I got to know somethin' about a man before I take him on," he said. "Where'd yuh come from? Who are yuh? What gives yuh the idea yuh want to hire out to the Cross B?"

"Who I am is none of yore damn business," Dave said easily. "An' the idea I had of wantin' to hire out here was one of the poorest I ever had."

His right gun slid into his hand, with a movement so soft and swift that it seemed not to stir a muscle of his body. Then: "Tell your gun-snake at the window to back up," he snapped. "I'm watchin' him an' if his trigger finger gets itchy, you'll be dead before the slug reaches me."

The anger which had begun to gather in Lash Linton's face gave way to a sort of startled respect. Then his eyes narrowed shrewdly. "Back up, Gila, like the gent says," he commanded the gun-slick at the window, without taking his gaze from Dave.

"I reckon I had yuh sized up wrong, hombre," he said, and there was a forced geniality in his tone. "Maybe I tromped on yore pride some, askin' them questions. I've heerd about yuh. Yuh're the feller that lost the memory of who he was, from bein' shot up some place. That ain't nothin' ag'in yuh. Might happen to any man. Set down—an' let's palaver some. Have yuh ever been able tuh figger out any part of what might have happened to yuh?"

Something in Dave was yelling for him to pull the trigger, to blast Lash Linton down. Sweat was on his forehead. His mouth had that old terrible dryness in it. In that moment, there must have been open death in Dave's eyes, but he forced his gun back into leather, feeling like he had been in a wrestling match.

"We don't need any palaver," he said. "I'm not takin' yore job."

He turned and stalked toward the door.

Steps, light and hesitant were coming down the steps to the hallway outside the door. In a moment a girl appeared there. A girl with a peachblown skin and a high-held golden head. Dave's heart turned over suddenly. Then her eyes fell on him, and the effect on her was as though she had seen a ghost. Her face went pale, her hands flashed to her throat, and she shrank back, wide-eyed.

Lash Linton's voice, strident and warning, cut across the room. "Come in, Claire. This stranger calls hisself the Blackjack Kid. He was gonna hire out to us, but we couldn't come to no agreement. So he's ridin' off in peace—an' safety."

There was an unmistakable emphasis, a threatening message in those last words.

The girl caught her breath, then straightened, making an obvious effort to control herself. "I'm sorry . . . . That is, I mean I'm sorry you're not going to—well, we need men," she stammered.

Dave saw fright deep in her eyes and something else—something he would have sworn was a plea. Then she swept past him into the room.

Lash Linton had his hand on the butt of his gun. Dave hesitated, while his brain raced.

Then he said, "Thinkin' it over, ma'am," he said softly, "I reckon I'll take the job after all."

The girl had her back to him then, but he saw her head and shoulders go tense. And Lash Linton was staring at him with sudden points of fire in the ice of his eyes.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Gun-Odds, Three to One!

BACK in the bunkhouse, Dave was oblivious to the talk around him, his mind on fire. That girl had known him! He was on the trail at last. And more than that. Claire Briscoe was scared—frightened of Lash Linton. Linton had practically warned her not to show that she knew Dave. And that must mean that Linton also knew him.

Lash Linton had recognized him from the beginning! He had been feeling the Blackstrap Kid out, trying to decide what he knew, playing a cat-and-mouse game with him. Then Matt Verne and the others came in.

"What's the matter with yuh—sick?" the outlaw demanded. "How come yuh didn't show up fer grub?"

Dave got up. "Been talkin' to Linton," he said. "Reckon I'll go an' see can I wangle some beans from the cookee."

He went out, but he had no intention of heading toward the kitchen. He had to see Claire Briscoe—had to find some way to talk to her alone!

As the bunkhouse door closed behind him, he stood a moment, eyes stabbing at the dark around him. His senses warned him of danger even before he caught a stir in the shadow of one of the cottonwoods. He flung himself sideways, as a gun blasted in the darkness.

The bullet screamed by his ear, and now another gun was talking as he ducked and weaved. He shot for the second flash, just before he spun around the corner of the bunkhouse. But he knew his aim had missed.

A saddled horse was standing by the corrals. He snapped the reins over the animal's head and hit the saddle in one leap. The men who had shot at him were evidently being cautious about rounding the bunkhouse after him, but as the horse got into action they came running, guns smashing through the silence. Bullets screamed around him as he quit the yard at a dead run. A moment later the darkness covered him.

He kept his stolen horse at a high lope, heading for Lariat Creek. Once there, he rode down-stream, following the bend back toward the ranch house. He had expected pursuit, but none came.

Maybe they figured he'd quit the country. He smiled grimly at the thought. He not only wasn't quitting the country, he was going back to the house. Some way, he was going to talk to Claire Briscoe.

He left his horse and went cautiously toward the house on foot. Approaching from the side away from the bunkhouses, he met no one. The veranda loomed in front of him. The only light along its length was that from the window where the snake-headed man had stood to cover him. Soundlessly, he crept to it, then tensed as the sound of voices came to him. They were inaudible, cautious, at first, but a moment later anger gave them carrying power.

"Yuh fool, if yuh start bunglin' things like that, yuh'll cost us our necks!" This was Lash Linton's voice. "I tell yuh that stall about not rememberin' anythin' is a trick. He knows us all right. By God, he gave that away to me when he was in here with that gun on me. I thought fer a minute he was gonna let me have it."

"Then what's his game?" Dave could not see the speaker but he guessed it was the snake-headed man, Gila.

"How the hell do I know?" Linton's tones were thick with rage. "It wouldn't matter if yuh hadn't muffed two chances of killin' him. Now listen. His showin' here forces our hand. If him an' the gal git together, there's gonna be hell to pay. The gal's got to go—tonight!"

"Kinda dangerous, ain't it?"

"Not the way I've got it figgered," Linton's voice was cruelly exultant. "Here's what's gonna happen. You an' Pete is gonna saddle three horses. Yuh're gonna take Claire over into nester territory—to Jeff Curtin's old shack. It's been empty for months. Come mornin' I'm givin' out the word that she's been took. We'll make it look like them damn nesters done it. In the meantime, yuh'll do yore job. When this outfit finds her dead, there won't be no holdin' 'em. We'll ride an' clean up every damn two-bit nester in the bunch." Linton laughed. "Then we'll let the sheriff see what he kin do to us. By God, there ain't a jury in the county that won't acquit us, an' pin some medals on us besides! Git goin'. Tell Pete to saddle the broncs real quiet, an' then come back here."

There was the sound of a chair being shoved back. Then Gila's quick footsteps going toward the door.

DAVE backed up hastily, slid off the end of the porch, his mind racing. The need to get Claire Briscoe was urgent now.

Swiftly a plan formed in his mind. He would wait at the corner of the porch. When Gila came by, he would slap him behind the ear with his gun. Then he would go in, throw down on Linton and warn Claire of the plot. If Linton showed fight, well. . . .

Something hard connected with the middle of his back. Then a voice whirred, like the rattles of a diamond-back: "Lift 'em, hombre, before I blow that snoopin' backbone outa yuh."

Dave froze. Gila was already coming down the porch.

"Go ahead, amigo," the voice behind him hummed softly. "I wanta see how much of a mess a slug makes when it slaps in this close."

Dave put his hands up slowly. His left holster lightened, and he heard the thud of the gun as it dropped in the dust. Gila was at the edge of the porch, coming toward him.

"Take it easy, Gila," the man behind Dave said. "I got him."

Dave's right gun thudded into the dust also.

Gila stepped forward, peering into Dave's face and then he cursed aloud in surprise.

"So it's you!" he rasped. "By God, mister, you've bought yoreself a one way ticket to hell!"

The man behind took the muzzle of his gun from Dave's back and stepped around to get a look at him. "Well, by —I'll be—go to hell! I never thought he'd have brass—*unh!*"

Dave's right hand had whipped down, knocking the gun aside. His left hooked in a short, vicious arc for the man's jaw. It connected high, smashing his captor backward. Instantly, Dave whirled toward Gila, ducking, to dodge a shot, and drove in. The snake-headed gunman's Colt whipped down and landed with the *chunk* of a dull ax biting into hickory.

Dave's eyeballs seemed to explode, then he was down on the ground, fighting hard to stave off the tide of darkness that rushed into his head. . . .

Minutes later, he came to, bound, on the floor of the ranch living room. He was half conscious, his head a ball of savage pain. And he heard Lash Linton's voice saying, "Good thing yuh didn't shoot him. Take him with the gal an' make it look like the damn nesters killed him, too, when he tried to git her away. Yuh kin—"

Then consciousness faded again. . . .

WHEN he came to, he was tied on the saddle, on his belly, tied like a sack. He started to say something, but the pounding on his middle drove the breath out of him. He lay dangling in agony, trying to figure things out. Two horses were ahead of him, and he heard the hoofbeats of another animal at his side. Evidently they were taking him and the girl to the cabin where they were to be killed.

He became aware suddenly that the darkness was fading. The ground underneath his eyes was graying. S[illegible]p was not far. Then the rider ahead drew rein and they halted.

"This is it," Gila's voice grated. "We'll take 'em intuh the cabin while we'll make things look right, jest in case some of the boys take a notion to try an' figger how it happened."

Dave felt them tugging at the ropes which bound him to the saddle. He kept his body limp. He had passed the time on the ride by working his wrists free enough to slip from the bonds whenever he wanted to, but his ankles were still tightly bound. They pulled him from the saddle, letting him fall to the ground. He kept limp and fell in a crumpled heap.

"Stand up, you son!" Gila cursed, kicking him.

He lay silent. Gila and the other bent over to take hold of him. Dave's arms snapped up, catching Gila about the head. He yanked, jerking the smaller man over on him, in a full somersault. The gunman's threshing feet hit the other man's straightening form, knocking him off balance.

Dave's right hand reached for Gila's right gun, yanked it. The man Pete had his gun out, but could not use it, because Gila's body covered Dave.

"Reach!" Dave rapped out.

The horses were stamping and swinging, spooked. The hind quarters of Dave's mount shifted toward Pete, and the gunman jumped. Narrow-eyed, Dave triggered. Gila was twisting and squirming in his grasp. Dave's shot missed.

Pete, sheltered by Dave's horse, crawled into his own saddle, spur-raked his horse and drove for safety.

Gila had gotten his left gun free. Now, he twisted in Dave's grip, swinging the muzzle toward the latter's head. Dave snapped his head aside as the gun roared, ripping his ear drum. The muzzle of his own gun was against the snake-headed man's ribs. He triggered. Gila's body jerked, went limp.

He wriggled free. Claire Briscoe's

voice was in his ears, "Dave! Dave! Oh, Dave!"

She was lying on the ground a few feet away, bound as he had been, her face pale and strained but her eyes glowing with relief—and with something else.

Dave passed a hand over his forehead. "Dave?" His voice was a hoarse croak.

"Dave! Don't you know me?"

Something stabbed like a dim flame in Dave's head. "Dave?" he questioned again. The veins on his forehead stood out suddenly. "Dave who?" he almost shouted.

Claire's eyes burned into sudden intensity. "Why, Dave Walker," she told him. "You're Dave Walker."

The flame in Dave's head flared into a blaze of light. He was sitting up, staring into the ground. No, not into the ground, but into the past—his own past! Suddenly he threw back his head and laughed—a great, swelling, ringing laugh, that had wonder in it, and uncontainable joy.

"Dave Walker!" he cried out. "Dave Walker!"

Then his hand was in his pocket, fumbling for his knife. He ripped the bonds from his ankles, slashed those which held the girl. His eager hands lifted her to his feet, pulled her to him. "Know you?" he demanded exultantly. "Know you? Well. . . !"

HER eyes were blazing up at him through tears of happiness. Her mouth trembled, lifted to his. Dave crushed her lips with his own.

After a long moment he let her go. His eyes swung to the limp form of Gila, and memory of another sort darkened his eyes—the memory of a red night when bellowing guns had shattered the body of Shoshone Kearney.

"I wish to God I'd known who it was I was killin'," he said grimly.

"Dave, don't look that way? Tell me what happened to you."

Dave told her. He even remembered the ride in the wagon and how he had been put into the box-car. Everything was clear now—connected up.

Claire's lips had lost color as he spoke. "So that was it!" she breathed. "Dad was never the same man after that night. They must have threatened him—threatened to swear it was he who'd murdered you and Shoshone. I knew dad was afraid of something, but he wouldn't say what it was. And all the time, Lash Linton was getting more and more power on our ranch, running things his own way. Then—dad died."

"How did he die, Claire?" Dave asked, narrow-eyed.

"He was supposed to have been kicked to death by a bad bronc. His head was all battered in, an' Gila an' Lash were with him. I—I didn't believe it. I didn't *know* they were lying. I just felt it, someway. And I was afraid. Oh, Dave, I expect I'm a coward, but I've been so afraid. I've let Lash run things. . . ."

Dave's jaw tightened. "His day fer runnin' things is past," he said.

Then, after a moment, he asked, "Where can you go, where yuh'll be safe?"

"Why—I don't know. Town, I guess. If. . . ."

He shook his head. "Too risky. I let that Pete man coyote on us. He'll be bringin' word to Linton, an' Linton'll be watchin' the trails to town."

Then, suddenly, Dave slapped his thigh. "What a dumb fool I am!" he exclaimed. "Linton'll be doin' more than that. He'll have that army of his on the warpath. It's his only chance, an' he'll take it. He don't need you dead fer an excuse. Jest abduction'll do. He'll be sendin' a few that he thinks he can trust to comb the countryside for us. The rest'll ride against the nesters. How

many are they? Will they have a chance if it comes to a showdown?"

"Not a chance on earth," the girl told him. "They'll be outnumbered three to one."

"An' he'll strike without warnin'," Dave muttered. "Wipe 'em out!"

"That can't happen," Claire interposed swiftly.

"Then listen: You ride to the nearest homestead, spread the word. Tell the crowd to fork leather an' ride out of danger. I'm goin' for the sheriff."

"Oh, no! You can't. If it was too dangerous for me, it is for you, too."

Dave shook his head decisively. "That's different. I'll know how to get through."

Over her protests, he had his way. He saw her ride off to warn the nesters. Then he swung into the saddle and hit for town.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Flag of Courage

HE rode warily, keeping to cover as much as he could. He knew that Lash Linton must be desperate now. He had to keep the sheriff from learning the truth. No doubt, he had sent his most trusted men out with instructions to get him and the girl, dead or alive. The others would be sent against the nesters, for he would have to keep up his bluff of blaming them for Claire's disappearance.

The trouble was that the short trail to town narrowed between Cholla Mesa and high rimrock on the other side, and time was precious. He dared not attempt to go roundabout, for fear that something would happen to keep the nesters from getting to safety. If Linton jumped them before they got away, or trailed them and they had to hole up, he wouldn't be able to get to the sheriff soon enough.

And it was near Cholla Mesa that the thing he feared happened. There was a movement in some brush at the foot of the mesa. He flung himself down on the neck of his horse, just as a Winchester cracked. The bullet ripped across his shoulder, like the touch of hot iron. He jerked his six-shooter, and charged straight for the brush.

The unexpected move disconcerted the two men who were there. One of them jumped his horse sideways toward some trees. The other stood his ground, levering his Winchester. Dave heard something thud into flesh, and his horse checked, tried to swerve.

But he was in six-gun range now. He thumbed three shots at the man with the Winchester. The gunman sagged in the saddle and fell sideways. His horse stampeded, dragging him, with his foot caught in the stirrup. And the man in the trees shot twice, but turned and ran when Dave swerved toward him.

Out of the corner of his eye, Dave saw that two other men were riding out toward him from the rimrock side. Two others were galloping up from the bottleneck of the trail. He raked his horse with steel and plunged into the trees, following the man who had run. Then his horse went to his knees, throwing him into the brush. The poor beast had been shot in the lungs and had kept on until he was literally dead on his feet.

Dave took time to snatch Gila's saddle-gun from underneath the flaps, then he was running through the brush toward Cholla Mesa.

It was his only chance. The slope of the mesa was too sharp to offer a trail to mounted men. If his enemies wanted to follow him, they'd have to dismount.

He plunged upward, lungs heaving. The two from the other side were half way across the flat now. One of them saw him and raised his Winchester. Dave snapped his rifle to his shoulder, drew a long breath to steady his nerves and squeezed the trigger. The man with the

Winchester flung it from him, with a wide movement of the arm and dropped from the saddle.

His companion swerved, riding for the shelter of the trees. Dave shot at him once, missed, and then he was out of sight. Dave climbed on up the steep slope.

As he toiled up he took stock of the situation. Without a horse, there wasn't any chance of getting to the sheriff, and if those men down there kept their heads, he'd have mighty little chance of getting a horse.

A distant sound of firing came to him now, and he stopped to listen. From the number of guns in action it sounded as though a general battle was on. Had Linton gotten to the nesters before Claire could warn them?

The firing kept on as he climbed, and when he came out on top of the mesa he cursed, wonderingly. Across a low ridge to the northward, about two miles distant, he could see a house and before it a semi-circle of tiny figures that moved occasionally. The sound of gunfire was continuous and intense.

This must be the log house of which Claire had spoken. The settlers had holed up there, and Linton and his men were attacking.

His heart sank. They would be there, holding on desperately against long odds, waiting for the sheriff and his posse. The sheriff would not come, and if Claire was with them, he had sent her to her death.

Grim-jawed, somber-eyed, he began to plan how he might kill one of the men below and get his horse. But the men had disappeared, and he knew that the attempt he had in mind would be suicide. They knew that he was afoot. All they had to do now was to sit and wait him out.

Claire, meanwhile, would have gotten the bullet which would silence her forever. and her silence would make Linton boss of the ranges, and sign the death-warrant for the nesters as well.

There might be another way. If he could get over to where the fighting was! The men below would be keeping a position between himself and town, aiming to keep him from getting through the bottle-neck of the trail. If he went down the other slope of the mesa and circled. . . !

HALF an hour later, winded, shirt ripped to tatters by thorns and brush, he looked down from the cliff back of the log house. The attackers, dismounted and taking all cover, had moved up to within a hundred and fifty yards. For a moment, he hesitated. He did not know whether Claire was with the defenders or not. If she were not, his job would be to find her and do what he could to protect her. But he had to find out.

A break in the face of the cliff, sloping and brush-covered, offered him cover. He took it, sliding, working his way cautiously down. At the bottom, he was confronted with an open space of fifty to sixty yards. Across part of that space he would be under the fire of the attackers, and across all of it he would make a target for the defenders. He peered, hoping for some glimpse of Claire at one of the windows, but there was no sign of her.

After a moment, he took a long breath and darted out into the open.

He half expected a hail of fire from the Linton crowd, but none came, and he realized that they were not sure whether or not he was one of their own men, rushing to attack the rear of the building. Before they had made up their minds, he was out of their sight, cut off by the end of the house.

A Winchester appeared at a rear window, a grim face behind it. He threw up his hands, yelling, "Don't shoot!" and

kept on running. The man at the window watched him, puzzled. He did not trigger, but kept the sights of the rifle centered on Dave's chest.

"I'm a friend of Claire Briscoe's," Dave panted. "She here?"

The nester's eyes narrowed. "Depends," he grunted. "What name yuh callin' yourself."

"Walker—Dave Walker."

"Hand your rifle to me an' crawl through the window."

He walked behind Dave into the big living room, still distrustful. Claire was there. She flung herself into Dave's arms with a sob which was half joy, half despair.

"I couldn't make it, honey," he told her. "They got my horse, an' there wasn't any way I could get through."

He was aware that the firing inside the room had checked, that faces, suddenly somber and grim, were turned toward him accusingly.

"Then that means there's no hope," someone said, slowly. The words rang on the silence like a knell.

The front of the structure in which he stood, Dave saw, was one big room which ran the full length of the house. Behind it were smaller rooms, through one of which he had entered.

The front room was shuttered and had evidently been prepared for defense. Heavy furniture, tables, boxes of provisions and sacks of sand were piled in a line along the inner wall, and behind these were the women and children, protected from the bullets which ripped through the shutters and the loopholes.

Some of the men Dave recognized as old neighbors, and after the first instant of disappointment these came up to him and shook his hand. Claire had told them all that had happened.

"I wanted to show myself to those men out there and order them to quit, but these people wouldn't let me. Make them, Dave," Claire pled.

Dave shook his head. "The'd be an accidental shot the minute yuh showed yoreself," Dave said. "Linton can't afford to have you talk."

A grizzled homesteader named Ike Glennon, who had been a friend of Shoshone's nodded approval. "We ain't turnin' a gal loose into that gang of wolves," he said. "Not if the last one of us had to die for it!"

Somebody at one of the loop-holes shouted. "Git to yore places. They're movin' up."

THERE was a rush to get back to the loop-holes. Dave caught up his rifle and moved with them. The man who had called out gave a queer gasping cry and sank to the floor. A Winchester slug had found its way through his forehead.

Dave took his place. He saw that the outlaws were not only moving forward but spreading out, to surround the house. It was only a matter of time before the horns of the semicircle would meet behind the house. Then one concerted rush would finish them.

He searched for Lash Linton but could see no sign of him. A hat and part of a shoulder stirred behind some brush in front of him. He sighted carefully and squeezed the trigger. The man behind the brush slumped and then rolled into the open, where he lay motionless. Dave guessed that he had paid off the homesteader who had taken a bullet through the head.

The firing had gotten hotter now. The room was a fog of powdersmoke. Dave emptied his rifle, and turned to reload. Another man was down, and Claire had taken his place. Her lovely, delicately chiseled features were set in lines of fierce determination, her blue eyes blazed. When this place was taken, she could only hope for death, in any case. And

he knew that she must be holding herself responsible because it was Cross B men—the renegades whom she herself had hired upon Linton's recommendation, thinking they were honest cow-hands—who were doing this thing.

Bullets ripped through the shutters in a leaden hail. Slug-shattered, the wood no longer offered any protection at all.

Dave saw Ike Glennon's gray-haired wife at his side, bandaging the oldster's bleeding arm. Her wrinkled face had a serenity of courage which caught at Dave's throat. He turned back to his loophole, his eyes stinging with something other than powdersmoke. And in that moment he glimsped Lash Linton.

The boss of the Cross B had jumped from one clump of brush and run forward to another. By his side was Matt Verne.

Linton's face was snarling as he yelled to his men, but Matt Verne looked as though he was having a good time. There was a half-smile on his lips and he moved up deliberately. Dave could have shot him before he reached cover, but something held his trigger finger. Then the sound of firing came from behind the house. They were surrounded.

Somebody yelled from the back rooms, and a couple of the men ran out of the living room to help defend the rear. There were now only half a dozen rifles in the front room to confront the withering fire of more than a score of Linton's gunfighters.

At any moment now, the rush might come. Dave put down his rifle and walked to the center of the room. "I've got a plan," his voice rang out. "It might work. I'm goin' to open the door an' go out. Give me a white flag. When I'm out, bolt the door behind me."

"No! No!" it was Claire crying frantic protest.

"What's the idee, Walker?" one of the men who was a stranger to Dave growled. "Gittin' too hot fer yuh? Yuh figgerin' to change sides."

"Don't be a damn fool," Ike Glennon snapped. "Why would the boy have stuck his head intuh this trap if'n he was that kind?"

"Dave, you mustn't!" Claire cried. "They'll kill you. You know they'll kill you!"

But Dave had opened the door. For an instant he stood there, one arm about Claire, a hot gun in his hand. Then Glennon handed him part of a sheet which had been torn for bandages. He swept her in his arms, pressing his lips to hers, and then nodded to Ike Glennon. The old-timer took Claire gently by the shoulders and held her back.

"Let him try his luck, honey," he said quietly. "We're all due to die purty quick now. If he kin do anythin' . . . "

The girl gave a sob and slumped to the floor.

Dave took the white flag and waved it until the firing had stopped. Then he stepped out the door and closed it behind him.

For a split second he felt his flesh quiver. It was as though the bullets which so long ago, had cut him and Shoshone down, were ripping into his flesh again. He could feel their dull impact, he knew again the feeling of having his body broken inside. Then he was striding out toward the clump of bushes which hid Lash Linton.

The firing had stopped, except for scattered reports behind the house where the attackers could not see what was going on. Curious faces were lifting from the bushes in front of him, as men, still hesitant, risked the chance of a shot from the house.

Dave walked rapidly with a slogging stride, expecting every instant to feel Linton's slug bite into him, but none came. When he was within yards of

the bushes the boss of the Cross B stood up.

His face was a writhing mask of fury. Behind him, grinning faintly, was Matt Verne. He had a six-gun in his hand.

Dave knew then why he had not been shot. Matt Verne had stopped it. Matt was giving him his chance to speak his piece, whatever it was.

He swept his arms wide and brought them together, motioning the other Cross B men to come in. After a moment, one or two stood up and began to drift over. Others followed, until there was a group of nearly a score.

•

THE faces turned toward him were not exactly reassuring. They were the faces of hired killers. The flush of battle lust was still in them.

Dave knew that there were some among them who were dead to all considerations of decency—ruthless, thinking only of their own advantage. Yet they would have, too, the warped code of the killer—loyalty to the man whose gunplay they took. Knowing that, Dave knew that when the showdown came, he himself would die. But there was an exultance in him now, for he knew also that Lash Linton would die. And with Linton dead, the fight might go on but only half-heartedly, if at all.

"Well, what do yuh want? Git it off your chest," Lash Linton's voice ripped at him.

Dave Walker smiled mirthlessly. "I'm goin' to do that," he drawled. "Before I'm finished"—his voice chilled—"I'm goin' to get it off my chest the way you once did with me—an' Shoshone Kearney."

Lash Linton's eyes narrowed. For an instant, he crouched, hand clawing at his holstered six-shooter.

Matt Verne's voice tapped a mocking warning at him. "Let him say his piece, Lash."

Dave saw the scarred face of the man called Pete in the crowd. As Verne spoke, Pete moved toward him.

"The nesters didn't kidnap Claire Briscoe," Dave's voice sung out, suddenly vibrant. "Lash Linton did. He told Gila an' Pete to murder her. I killed Gila, an' Pete coyoted. The girl went to the nesters to warn them not to fight. But it was too late. A spy had brought word that you fellers was on the move. The nesters holed up here, like they had planned to do. Claire is in there with them, free. You boys have been told yuh was fightin' skunks that would kidnap a gal—instead, yuh're drawing fightin' pay from a murderin' snake that tried to have one killed!

"Lash Linton's name is Cleaver Martin. He's wanted for murder. Him and two other snakes killed Shoshone Kearney because he knew too much. The other two are in hell—sent there by my lead. But Lash Linton is goin' to hang. The sheriff an' a posse is on the way here now. You boys are . . . *Look out behind you, Matt!*"

His eyes flashed to Verne. The latter whirled to face Pete. In that instant, Lash Linton's hands dipped for his guns, moving with blinding speed.

But Dave was not caught. Deliberately, he had sprung that trap, knowing that Linton would draw the moment he thought Matt's gun was off his—the moment he had the chance to get the jump on Dave.

Dave's hands flicked; his guns came upward, blasting.

He saw only the beginning of horror come into Lash Linton's eyes as the lead smashed home. Then he was whirling, crouching, his guns on the crowd. As Matt Verne's colt jarred its slug into Pete's belly, other hands were racing for holsters.

"Hold it!" Dave yelled. "I'll kill the first man who yanks a cutter."

The thing had happened so unexpect-

edly that the gunmen were caught off-guard. They hesitated.

Then Matt Verne's voice rang out: "Take it easy, hombres!" he yelled. "There's half a dozen of us here that wants to git to the bottom of this thing. Let's see what the gal's got to say."

He need scarcely have spoken. The door to the log house had burst open and Claire Briscoe was already on her way.

The Cross B men stood hard-eyed, undecided. "What the hell is this," one of them growled. "We was hired to fight, wasn't we? We lettin' this buzzard git away with it?"

Matt Verne had an inspiration. "Fight fer who?" he cracked. "Here comes the boss of the Cross B now!"

Claire was breathless, wild-eyed, a six-gun in her hand.

"Dave—are you—hurt?" she panted. Then without waiting for an answer she blazed at the crowd. "The first one of you that shoots at him will have to kill me."

"What'd I say?" Matt Verne yelled. "*There's* a fightin' boss fer yuh!"

Some of the gunmen were beginning to grin. One of them, a grizzled, hard-eyed veteran of the dim trails, growled, "What kind of circus is this, anyway? We heerd yuh'd been kidnaped, Miss Briscoe. What do yuh want us to do? Go in an' clean up them settlers, or not?"

Claire's chin was up. "Those people never did me any harm. There's range enough here for everybody. Why should the Cross B hog it? I want you to go back to the ranch and leave these people alone." Then suddenly her voice softened, and her eyes were shy. "But what I want doesn't matter," she said, putting her hand on Dave's arm. "Here's the new boss of the Cross B. You take your orders from him."

Dave smiled down at her. "I reckon I'll never be the real boss," he said. Then his eyes sought Matt Verne. "But I know who'll be the real foreman—if the damn fool ain't got too much hawk in him tuh stay that close!"

Matt Verne's laugh rang out free and gay. "Mebbe I ain't such a fool, at that," he said. "Come on, Cross B, let's go git dinner!"

THE END


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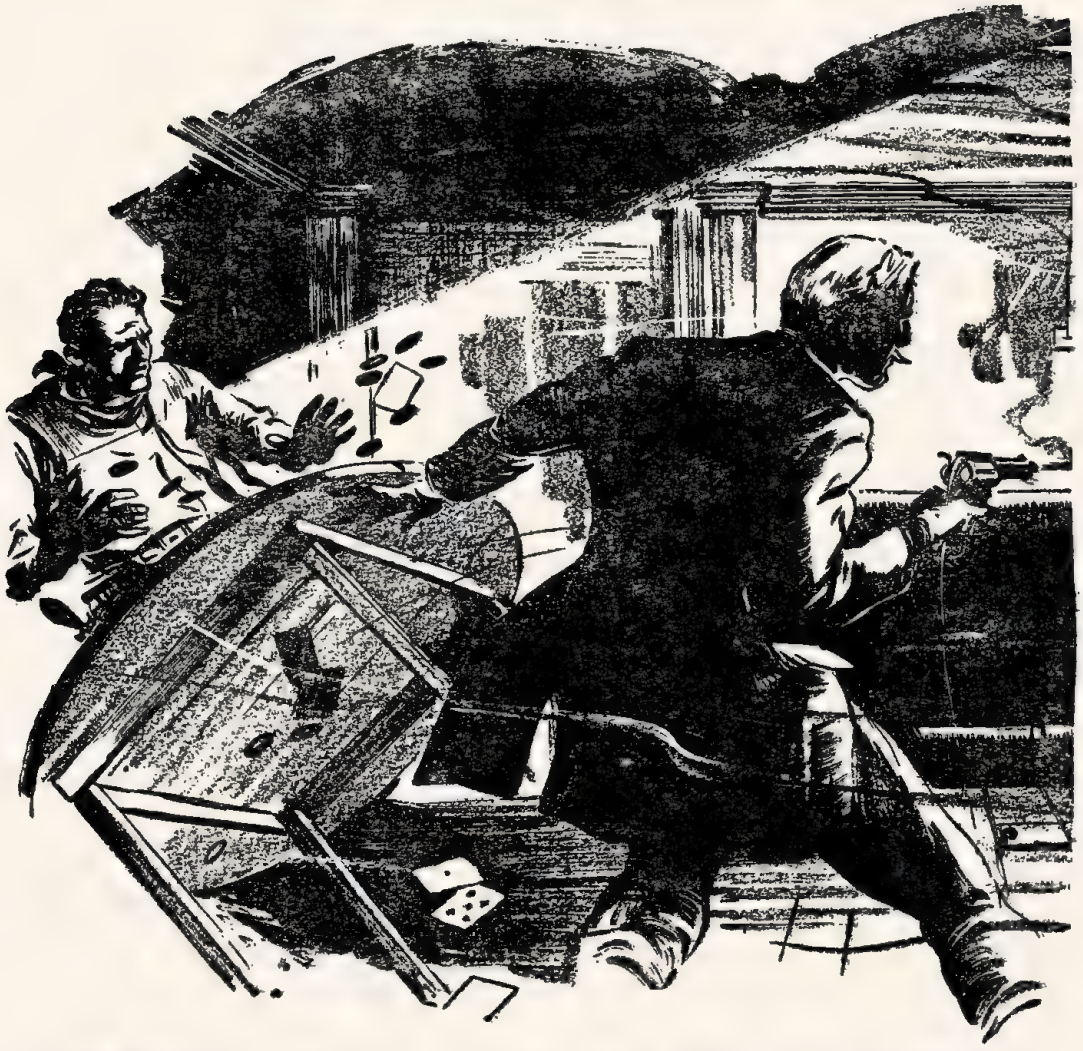
# Tinhorns Can't

## By Walt Coburn

*(Author of "Outlaw Bronc Rider," etc.)*



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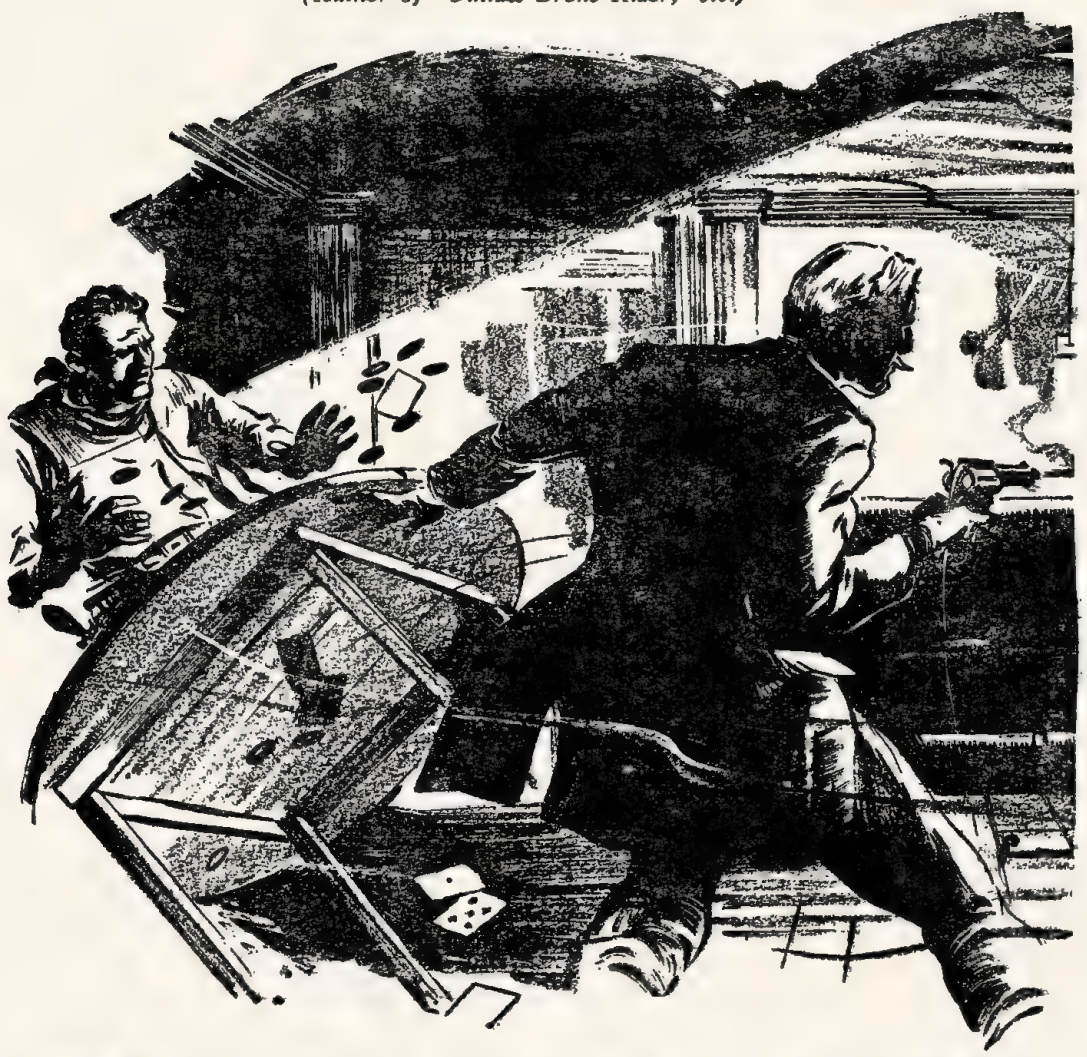

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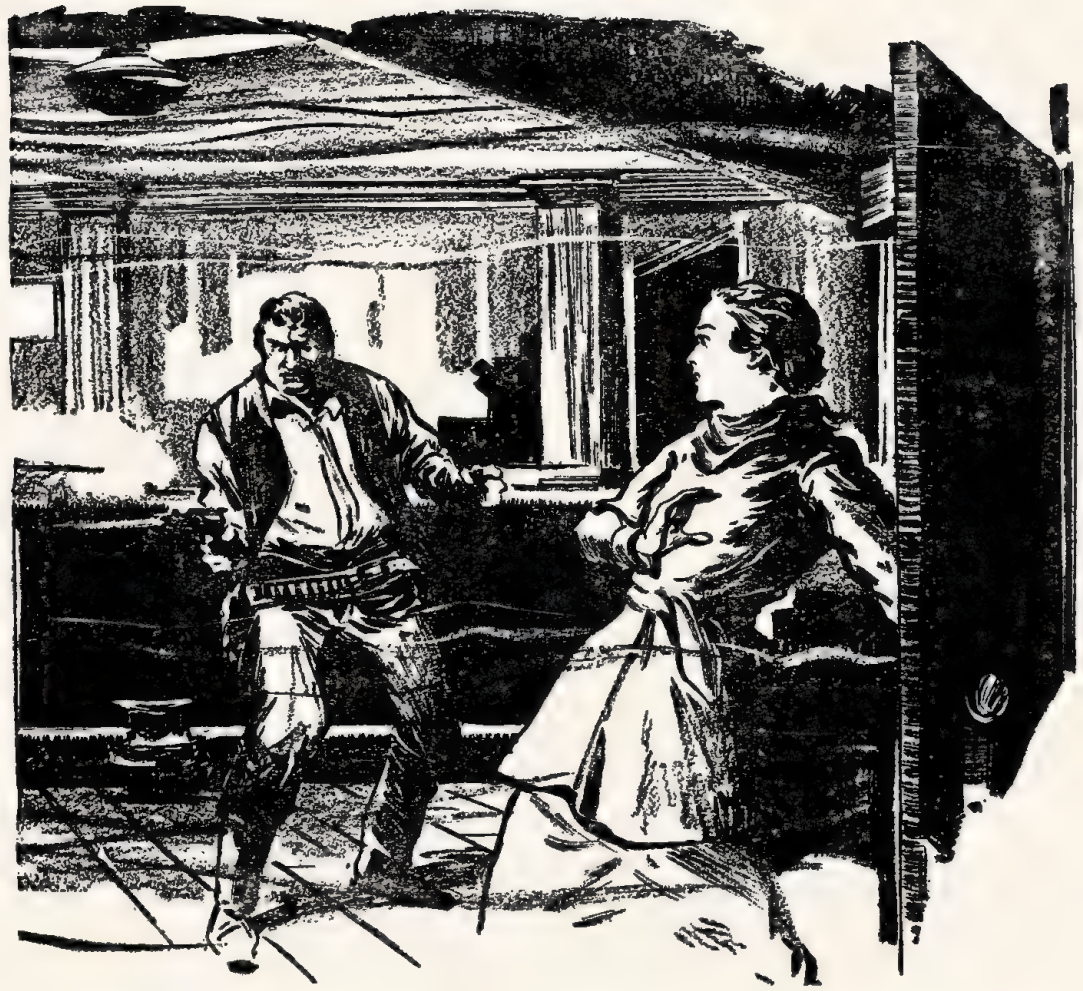

**A gripping, human novelette of a cow-town gambler who came back from hell to play his last hand straight**

He stood on his feet now, a faint, sardonic smile on his thin lipped mouth, as the judge pronounced sentence.

"You've been found guilty of the murder of Bob Culver," said the judge, his voice cold. "The charge of murder in the first degree was, because of lack of sufficient evidence, reduced to the less exacting charge of manslaughter. But, what evidence there was, has been strong against you, convincing in every detail. The murder was a brutal killing, and the man who killed Bob Culver deserves hanging. My only regret in passing sentence is that I cannot make your punishment severe enough to pay in full your debt to decency, to humanity, and to the State of Montana. Instead, I am sentencing you to twenty-five years at hard labor in the State's prison at Deer Lodge. And

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I will do all in my power to see that you serve the full term." Judge Lee's blue eyes, set under shaggy, graying black brows, were hard, merciless. His voice had fallen heavily on the silence of the stuffy, packed little cow-town courtroom.

"Have you anything to say, Luke Fox, before you are taken from this room?" he asked, his voice a hard challenge.

Luke Fox's sallow, lean jawed face was a wooden mask. Hatred showed in the depths of his gray eyes. Well groomed in his tailored black broadcloth and spotless white linen shirt, and black string tie, his long-fingered hands gripped the edge of the table in front of him. He looked away from the men in the jury box, and turned to the gray-haired judge. The steel handcuffs on his wrists clinked faintly.

"I didn't kill Bob Culver," he said in his flat, expressionless voice. "But that statement is plainly out of order. I'll cut cards with you to see whether you hang me or turn me loose." Deuce Fox's thin lips parted in a twisted smile that showed his even white teeth beneath the tightly waxed moustache. The lift of the tinhorn's upper lip was like a snarl. "Cutting king low, deuce high."

"Take him away," snapped the judge, and rapped for order.

The two heavily-armed deputies had their hands on their guns. The courtroom held a lot of men who would be more than willing to lynch this cold-nerved gambler. A deck of cards, cutting low card to win, had figured prominently in the evidence which had convicted the accused tinhorn of the killing of Bob Culver, cowman, and mention of cutting cards was like waving a red flag at a herd of wild bulls. An ominous growl swept over the crowd as it edged and pushed towards the prisoner and his burly guards.

"Order in the court!" roared the judge, and he pounded for order with the barrel of a six-shooter. "Order in the court, men! Take the prisoner back to jail. Clear the court, Sheriff!"

Men were in the habit of taking Judge Lee's orders. They backed away from the prisoner and let the sheriff herd them out of the courtroom.

The two deputies hustled the prisoner back to jail. And that night they slipped him out of town and took him by train to prison.

AT DEER LODGE, the prisoner was stripped of his expensive clothes; his sleek black hair was clipped. The law of the State of Montana wrote his name in the record book and gave him a number. Deuce Fox, soft-handed tinhorn gambler, was given a sledge and put to work on a prison rock pile.

When he showed fight he was knocked down. They fastened a heavy iron ball and chain to his slim ankle and told him that his next offense would land him in solitary. He slapped the guard across the mouth. And got solitary.

So began the twenty-five year sentence in prison. He was locked alone in a dark cell, offered rations of bread and water. But he preferred it to swinging a heavy sledge. Deuce Fox had never done a day's hard manual labor in his life. The black solitary confinement was preferable.

Time after time Deuce Fox went back to the black cell, the bread and water, and the endless black silence. There he nursed his brooding, cold hatred until his health was undermined. He emerged with a face that was a transparent ugly gray after the prison barber had shaved him. His cold, pale gray eyes were fever-bright, and there were dull red splashes of color on his cheekbones. While he was getting his hair cut he was seized by a coughing fit that left a tell-tale red stain on the white towel he held to his mouth. When he had

recovered a little from his exhaustion that left him stretched out limp on the floor, in a toneless, flat voice like that of a dead man, he cursed the law and all that it stood for.

They took Deuce Fox on a stretcher to the prison hospital. He was given nourishing food and plenty of rest, but it was too late to restore health to his torn lungs. The dread prison disease had fastened its insidious, stealthy tenacles on the tinhorn gambler's body. He was doomed—doomed to a living death. Even Judge Lee and his jury of cowmen and honest townsmen could not have asked for a more cruel punishment for the man they had exiled for killing Bob Culver.

As for Deuce Fox, he sat propped with pillows on his hospital cot, playing endless games of solitaire. He had so cleverly crimped and marked that deck of cards that even the prison doctor could not read the markings when they played two handed poker or black-jack, pitch or rummy. And the prison doctor was regarded as the best card player at Deer Lodge prison.

Deuce Fox regained something of his strength, but hard labor on the rock pile was out of the question. And because he liked the hospital, the tinhorn was careful not to make any mistakes that would infringe on his privileges. But he had not softened. The warden and prison guards came under the glitter of his hating eyes. When any of them came within earshot he would stare at them, upper lip lifted from his white teeth.

Deuce High Fox had served ten years and thirteen days of his twenty-five year sentence when the real murderer of Bob Culver, badly shot up in a saloon fight and on his deathbed, made a full confession. Before he died he had proved to Judge Lee and the twelve men who had served on the jury, that Deuce High Fox was innocent and was serving time for a crime he had not committed.

Deuce High Fox, working as doctor's assistant in the hospital, was taken to the warden's office.

"The law," said the warden heavily, "has made a grave mistake, Fox. You're free. I have here on my desk an absolute pardon. Sit down and let's talk this thing over."

Deuce High Fox stared at the warden, his thin upper lip twisted. "There's not a damned thing to talk over with you. Give me the clothes you took away from me. Give me the gun your clumsy, blundering law took away from me at Alkalai when a prejudiced jury and a goat-whiskered, biased judge sent me up for a killing I didn't do. Those clothes and that gun belong to me. I want 'em. What your dirty damned law has taken, it can't give back. You can't give a dying man back the life you stole from him. You're not God!"

DEUCE HIGH FOX had been in his early thirties when the law laid its heavy hand on him and sent him to prison at Deer Lodge. Then Deuce had been erect and handsome, a Beau Brummel among the sporting class who gleaned a living from the hard working gold miners and free-handed cowpunchers.

The man who returned that night, ten years later, was stooped and his careful, halting gait was that of a sick man. His face was bony, the cheeks and eyes sunken, the skin transparent gray. The tinhorn's hair was snow white. Only the eyes were unchanged. They seemed brighter than before, with glittering sparks of hatred in their gray depths. For hatred is one thing that thrives and grows stronger inside the granite and steel of a black prison cell.

So Deuce High Fox returned to Alkalai, a white-haired, gray-faced man with

only his eyes wholly alive. A shambling wreck of a man whose out-moded clothes hung loosely on his bony frame.

The Eastbound halted at Alkalai only long enough to take on water and discharge its only passenger. At the deserted station only the ticket agent showed, there in his lighted office, for the train stopped at that graveyard hour of two in the morning. The ticket agent and telegraph operator had given the engineer his typed orders, dismissed the lone man on the platform with an indifferent look, and gone back into his office to his clicking telegraph key. The train got under way, the headlight boring a white tunnel through the black night. Then the red and green tail lights on the last car dimmed and vanished in the distance.

Deuce Fox picked up his suitcase and headed across the tracks towards the row of lights that marked the main street of the little cow-town. He walked with the halting gait of a sick man. The distant whistle of the Eastbound came back dismally.

Ten years had changed the town of Alkali but little. There were two or three more saloons; a new brick hotel, but the dusty street was the same, as were the plank sidewalks, the hitching racks. The Last Chance, where Deuce High Fox had dealt and shuffled his marked cards and banked his poker game, was still there, at the end of the deserted street. Deuce Fox headed for its lights.

He shuffled through the swinging half-doors, then paused, his hard, glittering eyes sweeping the place in a quick glance.

A sheep herder was asleep in a chair, head on his arms across a deserted round-topped card table. The swamper was carrying brass cuspidors out the rear door. The saloon-keeper was in his frosted glass partitioned office at the front of the bar, asleep in a big barroom chair, feet propped on a littered, open roll-top desk.

He had taken off his shoes, and his weary feet were clad in bright red socks that matched his silk suspenders. His bald head was dropped back on his thick bull neck. The snoring man's face was dull red, tinged with purplish lights, the mashed nose a slightly deeper red. His white apron was spotted with spilled liquor, his gaudy vest unbuttoned, but held together by a heavy gold watch chain with an ornate lodge emblem. On his paunch rested a neatly brushed toupee of glistening black.

The creaking of the swinging half-doors brought him half awake. As Deuce Fox walked to the bar, depositing his suitcase on the floor, the saloon man reluctantly slid his feet from the desk, replaced the toupee on the shining bald dome. He yawned and got to his feet. Without giving the lone customer more than a resentful, sleepy glare, he took a whiskey bottle and two glasses from the back-bar and set them on the liquor stained bar.

"Absinthe and bitters and a tall, thin glass," rasped Deuce High Fox in his toneless voice. His eyes fixed the sleepy saloon man with a cold, steady stare.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Snakes Die Hard!

THE big man behind the bar recoiled as if struck across the face. His bloodshot eyes stared at the gray-faced wreck of a man whose right hand was hidden in the side pocket of his sagging black coat.

"God strike me blind!" he croaked. "It's Deuce High Fox!"

"Wrong, brother. I'm the ghost of Deuce High Fox, come back to haunt the men who sent him to hell. Now give me my drink, McCandless, and keep your hands where I can watch 'em. Bonded rye, not the rot-gut you keep in your bar bottle. Absinthe and bitters on the side.

The first drink I've had in ten years. It's on the house, ain't it, McCandless? Ain't it, you double-crossing snake?" Deuce Fox's words were spat across the bar.

Mike McCandless had never been called a coward. He looked without flinching into the cold eyes of the man from prison.

"Let's git this much straight, Fox," he said, both of his big clenched fists on the bar. "I'm not scared of you. And I'm not scared of the gun in your pocket. And damn well you know it. Seein' you just now give me a start. We was readin' how you'd bin pardoned out, but I didn't expect you so soon, nor in the shape you're in. But you ain't scarin' Mike McCandless."

He set out three bottles; rye, absinthe and bitters, and a tall, thin glass.

"On the house, Fox. And you're drinkin' alone." He turned his back and walked to the battered cash register. He opened it, took out a five dollar bill, closed it again and came back to the bar. He put the money down beside the bottle of rye.

"A custom of mine," he said, "that you'll be rememberin', like as not. A five spot to every bum, to spend on grub or booze or as he likes. He kin spend it here or take it all with him. But he gits no free drinks in the place and he butts into no spenders at the bar."

"So the man you railroaded into the pen is just a bum to you, eh, McCandless?"

"The title of a common bum honors you, Fox. The man I helped send to the pen ten years ago was a rat. Prison ain't made him over into nothin' different. You're still all rat."

"You admit framin' me into the pen?"

"There's no witness around," said Mike McCandless, his glance dismissing the presence of the snoring sheep herder, "and you know what cards was held in the game. You saw 'em played there in the courtroom ten years ago. I cold-decked you, Mister Tinhorn. I used your own kind of cards and dealt you a hand from the bottom. And the only regret I got is that you didn't hang."

"Hang for a killin' I didn't do?"

"You didn't kill Bob Culver, that's true. But shootin' a man in a gun fight is a white crime compared to the one I was punishin' you for, when I framed enough evidence to convict you."

"What in hell are you driving at, McCandless?"

"Twelve years ago, Fox, you fooled a good woman with your damned lies and your smooth manners. You knew her by her stage name, Dixie Dale, and you followed her from town to town on her vaudeville circuit until she fell in love with you. She wrote her husband who was in Alaska that she was getting a divorce to marry the man she loved and who loved her. Her husband was up there, prospecting for gold, up where the hardships were too big to ask any woman to share 'em. He got her letter a week too late to catch the last boat out. And with only her letter to keep him company that long winter, he hunted for gold—and found it. He caught the first boat for Seattle in the spring, with gold enough in his poke to satisfy the dreams of any man or woman . . . ."

Mike McCandless disregarded the tinhorn's sneering smile. "He hunted for his wife, who was Dixie Dale on the stage," the saloonman continued. "He followed her trail back and forth across the country. He never found her. All he found was her grave. She took poison in Butte, Montana, when she was deserted there by the blackguard she'd trusted. The blackguard's name was Fox—Luke Fox. They called him Deuce High Fox because his lucky game was cutting cards of big stakes, the deuce high. Dixie Dale was my wife, Fox. I figured that shootin' you

was lettin' you off too easy. I located you and marked time.

"I put you in charge of my gamblin' here at the Last Chance, and watched you. When Bob Culver was killed out behind the place one night, after he and you had a run-in about you cheatin' him at card-cuttin', I saw my chance to frame you. I was the only man who could furnish you with an alibi, because when the shootin' came off, you was with me in the back room. After your row with Bob Culver in the saloon, here, I'd called you back there to read you the riot act about crooked gamblin' in my place. And it was my testimony that placed you out in the alley with Bob Culver when he got killed. My testimony sent you to the pen. I wanted you hanged. But lookin' at you as you stand here, Fox, I'm glad you're like this. Dyin' slow. And knowin' why."

Deuce High Fox stood there, his hard, bright eyes staring, his lip curled back in a silent snarl. He was trembling a little, then a fit of coughing attacked him without warning, racking his body, doubling him up. Then his grip on the bar slid off and he sank to the floor. He lay there in the sawdust, the cough tearing his insides, a crimson pool on the floor under his graying face.

Mike McCandless came around the end of the bar. A faint, mirthless grin on his battered face, he coldly watched the man on the floor.

He was so engrossed watching the coughing man at his feet that he was unaware of the young cowpuncher who came in through the short half-doors. He was a tall, well-made cowboy in dust-powdered, service-worn overalls and faded blue shirt and old Stetson. But dust and the stubble of black whiskers could not mask the handsome, finely-chiseled looks of the man. There was a careless, devil-be-damned swagger to his long legged gait as he came in, spurs jingling. The reckless, happy grin faded from his face.

He looked from the man on the floor to the towering bulk of the saloonkeeper standing over the sick man.

"What the hell, Mike?"

Mike McCandless looked up. "H'are you, Jeff? Thought you was out on the roundup. Have a drink." He motioned towards the bar.

"What's wrong? Who's that on the floor. Good lord, Mike, you didn't hit *that!*"

"He fell of his own accord, as he was about to pull his gun. Let him lay where he is, and help yourself to a drink, if you want one. He may croak, but rats is hard to kill. I'm glad it ain't clean sawdust he's spoilin'."

The young cowpuncher stared hard at the big saloon-man. Big Mike McCandless was tough. But it was a two fisted, battling toughness that went with a heart as big as the West he lived in. It was not like Big Mike to stand there without lifting a hand to help a dying man.

"What's gone wrong with you, Mike? Who is he? What's he done?"

"His name is Deuce High Fox. Ten years back, when your father, Senator Hannibal Lee, was on the bench, he sent Fox to Deer Lodge for the killin' of Bob Culver. A week or so ago a cowpuncher got shot up and before he died, he confessed to the killin' of Culver. The law turned Deuce High loose. Now, I reckon, he's come back to kill the Judge."

The man on the floor had quit coughing. He lay there, his hard, bright eyes congested now, staring at young Jeff Lee. Then his glance slid to meet the saloonman's eyes. His lip curled back and his teeth showed through bloody froth.

"I got a letter from the Judge," said Jeff Lee, "regarding him. Telling about the hell of a mistake made in sending an innocent man to the pen. He's to have

the best care possible, Mike. Everything he wants."

Jeff Lee stooped and picking up the limp form of Deuce Fox, carried him to a nearby chair. He took his handkerchief and wiped the blood from the ex-convict's mouth, then went for a bottle of whiskey. As Mike McCandless shuffled back behind the bar in his frayed carpet slippers, Jeff Lee gave him a quick, resentful side glance.

"There's a yarn, Jeff," said the big saloon-keeper, "that tells of warmin' a cold snake in your blankets."

## CHAPTER THREE

### Tinhorn's Backtrail

THEY said of Jefferson Lee that he was breaking the heart of the old Judge with his wild ways, his reckless gambling, his general hell-raising. The Judge had sent the boy to military school in the South, but young Jeff ran away. When Jeff returned to Alkali, he came up from Texas with a train load of cattle. The boy had a way with horses and was a top cowhand when he was fifteen.

Hannibal Lee hid his disappointment with a patient smile and bought Jeff a small cow outfit and a brand for his eighteenth birthday. For five years now, Jeff had made the outfit pay well—and had gambled away the profits he should have banked or shared with the Judge.

On the other hand it was Jeff's vigorous, untiring campaigning on behalf of his father that made possible the realization of the Judge's ambition to be elected to the state senate. Nobody but wild young Jeff had really understood how much it mattered to the proud old pioneer. His nomination, engineered by Jeff, had come as a surprise to the Judge. Enemies of the Judge and wild young Jeff claimed that the latter had gotten the electing votes with a shotgun and a bottle of whiskey.

"They lie like hell!" Jeff publicly denied the charges. "It was a six-shooter and a jug filled with Mike McCandless' best forty-rod. But I didn't need 'em to get votes for the Judge. He was one of the first men to practice law in Montana when she was a bronco territory. He was one of the first judges to sit on the bench in this State. The man he's runnin' against is a plow-pushin' sodbuster—one of the breed that's turnin' the sod of the West grass-side-under. All I did was swing a wide loop and round up the voters. Belly up to the bar, gents, and drink the health of the best damn man that ever crossed the plains—Hannibal Lee. Drink hearty, boys, and I'll whip any damned son that don't drink!"

That was Jeff Lee's way—loyal, hot-blooded and reckless. Generous to a fault, with a love for gambling, he worked hard and played hard when he hit town. Jeff Lee was a born cowhand, with a cowboy's faults and good points. His friends loved him. His enemies hated and respected him.

"I wouldn't swap my Jeff for a corral full of your steady going, Bible reading, law abiding young 'uns," Judge Lee once remarked. Then he added, with a twinkle in his dark blue eyes, "But thank God he ain't twins."

Hannibal Lee worshipped his only son who had been left motherless when he was a small boy. They'd been close companions in spite of the wide difference in their ages. Sometimes they'd quarreled, and then it was the clashing of two steel blades. Sparks flew, then Jeff by some gesture of splendid loyalty, would prove his love. Such as the time he had used all his wages on a Texas cow outfit to buy a present for the Judge—a fast race mare. He'd bought the animal, he explained a year or so later when the own-

ership of the mare was disputed by a horse trader from the Southwest, for a small part of its real value, making the deal with a rustler along the Mexican border. It had cost the Judge more money and no little embarrassment to keep the stolen mare.

JEFF LEE carried Deuce High Fox out of the Last Chance and put him up in the best room at the hotel. He got Doc Green out of bed to care for the sick man.

"The Judge is busy at Helena swappin' yarns and makin' new laws for us to bust, Doc. And I have to get back to my outfit. Look after this Deuce High Fox, will you? He's in tough shape. The Judge wrote me about the poor devil. He's done ten years in the pen for another man's crime. His lungs are gone. From his letter, sentencing an innocent man is eatin' at the Judge's heart. Like you'd feel if you gave a patient the wrong bottle of medicine and the man died."

"I knew Deuce Fox before he went to the pen," said the gray haired Doc Green, tucking his shirt tail into his trousers. "And I share Mike McCandless' opinion of that tinhorn. The Judge's only mistake was that he didn't hang Fox and save the State board money!"

"Patch him up, Doc. Give him the best you got."

Doc Green grunted, bent over a shoe lace. The shoelace broke as he gave it a pull. Doc was portly and bending was an effort. He was swearing lustily when the inner door of his bedroom opened and a girl stood in the doorway, a lighted lamp in her hand.

She was young, probably eighteen, with straight, blue-black hair in two thick braids that came below her waist. Her eyes were sapphire blue, the color of the dressing gown she wore over her nightgown. Doc's back was to her and he was unaware of her presence as he worried at the broken shoe lace.

Jeff grinned at her. "The toughest mule-skinner that ever handled a jerkline could take cussin' lessons from this dad of yours, Dale," Jeff said.

"And me convent-bred," nodded the girl, laughing as Doc straightened with a snort. "What's the trouble, Jeff? Did you finally realize your life's great ambition and shoot somebody?"

"I'll shoot any high-collared dude that tries to fool around my gal. Which reminds me to ask you for the last and final time: Will you marry me, and when?"

"The answer is still no, and the reason remains the same, gamblin' man. Who's been hurt?"

"Nobody, convent gal. A poor devil just out of Deer Lodge is at the hotel. You must have read about Deuce High Fox's release in the papers. Or do convent gals read wicked newspapers? He did ten years for another man's crime."

"That calls for a nurse, Doc," said the girl, and disappeared. Her voice came back from her bedroom. "Be ready in a jiffy, Doc."

Doc Green stood looking at Jeff, but not seeing him. He was deep in thought, scowling. He turned and walked to the door the girl had left open.

"Back to bed, youngster. I don't need you."

"But your patient does. I'm the only nurse in Alkali, and your valued assistant. Besides I've never seen a convict."

Doc Green's scowl deepened. "Not this time, Dale. Not this—"

But the girl drowned out his protests.

"Keep her here, Jeff," said Doc, grabbing his bag and bolting for the outside door, the shoe with the broken lace flopping with each stride. He looked at the young cowpuncher, a queer, almost frantic look in his eyes.

"Keep her away from that damned tin-

horn, if you love her," he said in a lowered tone. And then he was gone out the door.

BUT Jeff Lee could not keep Dale, adopted daughter of Doc Green and his mild-mannered little wife, from following Doc that night. And as Doc told Mike McCandless later, one look at the girl and the half-dead tinhorn only had needed one look at her to know the truth. That the girl, the living image of her dead mother, was the daughter of the stage singer, Dixie Dale.

"He's too good a gambler to let his face give him away. But in that first second, when she came into the room where he lay in bed, it showed in his eyes. I couldn't object too strongly when she insisted on taking the job of nursing him. She'd have questioned why and I hadn't the right answers."

"I should have killed him when he showed up, Doc," groaned the big saloonman, pouring himself a stiff drink. "I should have killed the damned snake!" He tossed off the straight whiskey and reached again for the bottle. But Doc Green reached the bottle first.

"Ease up on this stuff, Mike. I've warned you. You'll drop dead one of these times before the glass reaches your mouth."

"Him showin' up like he did," the saloonman growled, and Dale thinkin' all these years that you was her father. Too young when you claimed her at the Sisters' Orphanage at Butte to know the difference. Givin' the child your name and a home and your missus carin' for her, lovin' her as your own child. And givin' me the happiness of seein' the daughter of the one woman I ever loved, watchin' her baby grow up decent and fine and clean. Then her scut of a father showin' up like this. Why didn't I kill him, Doc, before he laid eyes on her. By God, if he tries to claim her, if he lets her know that he's her real father, if he—"

"She wouldn't believe him if he did, Mike. And he won't. Deuce High Fox plays a deep game. He'll keep his hole card buried, and he'll deal from a cold deck. He hasn't got all the cards in his hand yet. Hasn't got 'em marked to suit him. He sent word he wanted to see you. Don't do anything you'll hang for, Mike."

"They don't hang men for killin' snakes, Doc. But if it would settle things, I'd be too willin' to stretch rope. I'll pay Fox a visit."

Mike McCandless adjusted his toupee and called to a bartender off shift to handle the trade.

"She'll be there with him, Mike," said Doc. "So will Jeff, unless Dale's sent him back to the roundup, where he belongs. Be careful what you say or do. Fox is playing a crafty game."

"I'll match him, card for card, play for play. I kin deal 'em as dirty as Deuce Fox if it calls for that. I'll beat him at his own game."

Mike McCandless put on his hat and jerked off his apron, tossing it back of the bar as he headed for the hotel.

He found Jeff and Dale in the room where Deuce Fox lay between clean sheets. The whiskey Jeff had given the sick man had put a faint hint of color in the sunken cheeks. His upper lip twisted back.

"Don't excite my patient, Mike," said Dale, reaching up to adjust the black toupee above the circle of white hair that rimmed the saloon man's bald head. That was a trick of hers she had begun years ago when she was a small youngster, home from the convent for the holidays.

"And don't drink up his hooch," grinned Jeff, indicating the bottles of rye, absinthe and bitters on the table beside the bed. He put his arm around Dale's white uniformed shoulders and led her

out into the hall, closing the door on the sick man and his visitor.

"You sent for me, Fox?" Mike McCandless asked when they were alone in the room.

Deuce Fox nodded. "So her name is Dale Green. She's Doc Green's daughter."

"Let her think anything else, you rat, and I'll choke the life out of you."

"I thought you'd be thick-headed enough to figure it that way. So I sent for you to reassure you otherwise. After all, I'm—"

"You're her father, and you don't want to do harm to your own flesh and blood daughter? Is that what you think you'll tell me to keep me from killin' you?"

A FAINT, ugly smile twitched Deuce Fox's lips. "She's the image of her mother," he said, eying the man who stood with clenched fists beside the bed. "Perhaps she's touched a soft spot in my heart, McCandless. At any rate she tells me she's going to nurse me back to health. She'd have a hell of a low opinion of you if you killed a man in my shape. No, you won't do anything to injure me. I'm going to get back on my feet before long, and I'll be running my game again in a month. Judge Lee will grubstake me. You can sit in my game some night and I'll gamble with you for anything this side of hell and beyond. I'm not clumsy enough to claim the girl as my daughter. I'd have to prove that claim. And I never married Dixie—"

Mike McCandless' big hands gripped Fox's skinny throat. The ex-convict's eyes stared up at him, hard, mocking, taunting. The thin-lipped mouth twisted in a noiseless snarl. With an effort the big saloon man forced his hands open and he stepped back from the bed.

"Mention her name again, Fox, and so help me God, I'll choke the life out of your carcass. Do anything to hurt Dale and I'll tear the tongue out of your mouth. So help me God, I'll—"

The door opened and Jeff Lee stepped into the room. He looked at the two men and grinned faintly.

"The nurse has gone down to the kitchen to stir up some hen fruit into an omelet. Left orders to run you out when your five minutes were up, Mike. And when she gives orders, she shore pours it on."

"Drop in again, McCandless," said Deuce Fox. One of his hands came from under the bed covers. It held a blunt-barreled pocket gun.

He shoved it under his pillow and grinned faintly at Jeff Lee who was staring blankly at him. The gun-play had been smooth, swift, like the gliding move of a snake. Jeff Lee would have sworn the man was unarmed.

"My equalizer," the tinhorn said flatly. "It makes little men giant size. Even a wreck like me with half a lung can do as much damage as a big ox like McCandless, there. Get out, McCandless. Your wig needs more glue. It slipped jack-deuce when you kissed me good-bye. Get out." Deuce Fox had been talking without a movement of his lips.

"Ten years ago, Jeff," said Mike McCandless, his hand on the knob of the door, "that human snake swore he'd make the Judge pay for sendin' him over the road. Take a good look at that face of his. Does it look like the face of a man that forgets a debt like that? Judge Lee owes nothin' to that rat. Watch that jailbird or he'll bust your spine with a bullet or slip a knife between your shoulder-blades. Watch him."

As he went out, he almost collided with Dale who was carrying a tray laden with warm food.

"Tornado Mike," she looked up at him, protecting her tray. "Knocking down women and children. Your thatch roof is

slippin'. And you show signs of biting an ear off me."

"That man in there is a snake," said the saloon man, patting his toupee.

"You mean Jeff? I agree. A snake in the grass. A viper."

"It's no time for joshin', young lady. You're feedin' a damned snake. Deuce High Fox is the rat I mean."

"A two legged zoo, no less. Doc called him a skunk."

"You know Doc and I wouldn't lie, Dale. Stay away from the scut."

"What's a scut, Mike? Since I heard you say it, years ago, I've meant to ask you."

Dale reached up with one hand and patted Mike's toupee into place. Her eyes, soft, a shade misty, looked into his. "You and Doc are the two finest men in the world, Mike. But I'm not a baby any more. Don't worry about me. I can take care of myself." She patted his rough cheek and opened the door of the sick room. Mike went down the hall, swearing softly to himself.

The sight of Dale, the touch of her hand, had brought back memories to the saloonman. Those memories tore his heart as they evoked the vision of another Dale who had the same smile, the same soft eyes, the same wilfulness. Strangely enough, he had never hated the woman who had written the letter that nearly drove him insane, up there in the north country.

For her he had only pity and self-blame that he had ever tied so beautiful a girl to him by marriage vows, then left her to go in search of gold. He had never blamed her for anything. Now her daughter was nursing the man who had wrecked two lives and driven a good woman to suicide.

Mike headed for the Last Chance and the forgetfulness he tried to find in a whiskey bottle. Until that letter had reached him in the north country, Mike McCandless had never bothered with the stuff. Now his minimum was a quart a day.

Doc Green, who had known Mike in the Klondike, remembered him as the hardest man in the north country to whip. Big, handsome, good natured Mike McCandless, who had fought with his two fists, had never failed to help a weaker man along the trail.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Deuce High—or Death!

IF THERE was a drop of the blood of human kindness in the hate-shriveled heart of Deuce High Fox, Dale must have stirred it. She treated the man from prison as if he was deserving of the best. She prepared food for him that was delicious as well as strengthening. She talked to him, read to him, played cards with him. But what seemed to touch something deep in his twisted heart was her singing. With the light turned low, she would stand by the open window across the room from his bed, and sing softly. And as he watched, listening, the hardness would leave his eyes.

"I never believed in God or angels," he told her once, "but if I did, I'd liken the sound of your song to that of angels in heaven. I knew a woman once who had a voice like yours. I fell in love with her." He chuckled mirthlessly. "Satan, at the feet of the Virgin Mary....Turn up the light. I need a drink."

His eyes showed hard, glittering in the brighter light as he splashed whiskey and absinthe and bitters in a tall glass. And something in the look of the gambler's gray face frightened Dale.

That was as close as Deuce High Fox ever came to mentioning the woman who had been Dale's mother. She had been caring for him a month. He told her, his voice flat, toneless, that he didn't need her

any more. To put on her hat and coat and go home. Nor did he thank her in any way when he dismissed her.

When she had gone, not a little bewildered and hurt and somewhat frightened, Deuce High put on his clothes, shoved his short-barreled gun in the pocket of his coat, and walked down the street to the Last Chance.

His step was stronger, no longer shambling, and he walked with a hint of his old, defiant swagger. Never more than slight of build, he again filled his black broadcloth clothes. Save for the whiteness of his hair and the gray pallor of his face, he was not changed much from the Deuce High Fox who had run the gambling games at the Last Chance ten years ago. He walked through the swinging doors and to the bar behind which Mike McCandless was working. He held a five dollar bill between two fingers.

"The five spot you staked me to," he said tonelessly. "I'm sitting in on one of your games. When I've run it up to enough, I'll bank my own game. Any objections?"

"Have at it, Fox. You'll be where I kin keep an eye on you."

"I got a letter of credit from Judge Hannibal Lee if I need it. He said he'd written you to treat me like visiting royalty." He stared at McCandless, his lip twitching. Then walked over to one of the tables.

That was early in the night. Before dawn Deuce High Fox was banking his own game and his luck was still running high.

"King low, gentlemen," he repeated in his flat voice, without a movement of his thin lips, "deuce high. One cut of the cards. The lowest bet a dollar. The limit is the size of my bank. Bet your money and sleep in the streets. The game is deuce high."

The man from prison was winning. And so far as any man's eye could detect, the game was on the level.

"The devil himself is standin' behind the chair of Deuce High Fox," said a losing gambler.

Deuce High Fox was still winning when Jeff Lee came into the Last Chance at daybreak.

There was still quite a crowd around Deuce High Fox's table. Jeff halted at the front end of the almost deserted bar. Mike McCandless shook hands with him, mild surprise written on his battered face.

"All duded up in store clothes, like a travelin' drummer. Long time no see you —not since the night Fox hit town." He nodded towards the gambling table. "He run a five spot into that big bank. He's got the devil's luck, damn him!"

"He'll need it. Let's go into your office." Jeff vaulted the bar.

JEFF LEE took a long bulky envelope from his pocket and handed it across the bar to Mike McCandless. The envelope bore no stamps. There was a broken red seal on the back and in the left-handed upper corner was the official seal of the State of Montana.

"Keep that, Mike. Put it in the safe. It's important, and private. Among other papers in the envelope is a copy of the birth certificate of your daughter, Dale McCandless, born in San Francisco. Seven months, the Pinkerton detective agency reports, after your boat took you to Alaska. Also the record of Luke Fox, card sharp and forger and murderer. And proof beyond all doubt that he murdered another gambler who was also in love with the concert-hall singer Dixie Dale, whose married name was Mrs. Mike McCandless. Even as Luke Fox himself was indirectly responsible for her death. Take it easy, man!"

For Mike was reeling dizzily. Jeff caught him and lowered him into his big

chair. Mike's face was congested, purple. His hand pressed against his heart, he gasped for breath. Jeff got a pitcher of water.

"Shut the door, Jeff," said the big saloonman, his words a husky whisper. "I don't want anybody here but you. Doc was right. My number's up, Jeff. Read me them papers. Talk fast. Dale's my little girl? God, boy, you've made me the happiest man in the world. You're a good boy, Jeff. How did you git holt of these papers? How'd you git on the track? What made you suspect—?"

"That night in the hotel room when Fox sent for you. I sent Dale to the kitchen. I listened outside the door, heard the two of you talk, and added up the score. I did a lot of guessing. Somehow I'd never thought of Dale as Doc Green's daughter. Doc's wife just couldn't be the mother of a girl like Dale. And man, haven't you ever been struck by her resemblance to you? When she puts over one of her jokes. Her impulsive, open handed ways, the twinkle in her eyes when she's happy. She may be the image of her mother, but her eyes are yours. And you never guessed?"

"I only knew, Jeff, that I loved the kid because she was her mother's baby. How could I guess? My wife, Dale, didn't write me there was a baby. "Doc found the baby—Dixie Dale's baby. No father on the records."

"I'd bet all I have in the world, includin' my love for Dale, that she did write. She used the mail boxes at the theatres on her circuit. Got her mail there at the show houses and mailed her letters at the theatre mail boxes. Luke Fox was on the stage then, doing sleight of hand tricks with cards and gambling on the side. Luke Fox is an expert penman. He intercepted the letters between you and your wife. It's plain enough he wrote any letter you got in Alaska, and steamed open the envelopes of your letters to her, substituting forgeries. Because the Pinkertons dug up enough to show that Dixie Dale had no use for Fox. She hated him, he hounded her, broke her heart. She died of pneumonia in Butte.

"Your little daughter Dale was put in the orphanage with no birth record, as the illigitimate child of Dixie Dale. For professional reasons she'd always been known by her stage name. The orphanage record you and Doc saw showed only that. And I just came from Helena and Butte where I talked to everybody the Pinkertons had listed who might give me information. I turned the roundup and ranch over to my wagon boss the day after I overheard you and Fox talking in the hotel room. The Judge hired the Pinkertons."

"Then Deuce Fox has known, since the day I cut his trail after I come out of Alaska, that I was after him?" said Mike, breathing heavily as he sat back in his chair.

"He must have known, Mike. At any rate, he knew you were the husband of Dixie Dale. And he played his game, knowing all the time the card you had buried in the hole."

"He's a better gambler than ever I give him credit for."

"His luck's run out." Jeff Lee bit off the words.

"His luck's run out, son. Get me a drink of whiskey. I'm goin' out there an'—"

But the effort to rise brought a gasp of pain from the big man.

He dropped back in his chair, sweat beading his face, a stricken, helpless look in his eyes. "Doc's right. I'm licked. But I'll live long enough to pay off Deuce High. Git him in here, Jeff. Send him to me. Put him within reach of my two hands."

Jeff shook his head. "Sit steady, Mike. Take it easy. I'm goin' to fetch Doc."

MIKE greeted Doc Green with a game grin and patted his toupee into place with a shaky hand. "She's mine, Doc! My own baby!" he croaked hoarsely. "Tell him, Jeff. Here's papers Jeff brought, Doc. The boy's brought home the bacon." He gestured weakly with the bulky envelope, handing it to Doc Green.

"Easy, Mike, easy. Swallow this pill. Wash it down with water. Then sit back and take it easy. Now, Jeff, what the hell is the excitement?"

For probably half an hour Jeff Lee talked. And together they went over the papers and a long letter to Mike from Judge Lee which Jeff had fetched home from his trip.

"But," said Mike, "Dale mustn't know I'm her daddy. She knows that she's adopted, but there's no need of her knowin' her real history."

"She has a right to know," said Jeff. "Am I right, Doc?"

"Jeff is right, Mike. It'll make her happy. She worships you. And she'll be proud to know that her mother was the great Dixie Dale, the actress and singer. It'll explain the Klondike fortune you're leaving her. I don't think there'll be a happier girl in the cow country when she finds out about her parentage. Eh, Jeff?"

"Not if I'm any judge of the future Mrs. Jeff Lee."

Mike McCandless blinked his eyes hard. Doc had put the papers back in the envelope and locked them in the big safe.

Jeff opened the door of the office and looked out into the saloon. It looked like Deuce High Fox's game was about to close. Men were drifting away from the table where the gray faced tin-horn sat counting the money stacked in front of him.

"I promised Dale," he said, closing the door and facing Doc and Mike McCandless, "that I'd never gamble again. But I'm breakin' that promise now. I'm goin' out there and bust Deuce High Fox. Mike, I'm playin' your hand out. Ride herd on him, Doc. I'm trippin' Deuce Fox."

Jeff Lee went out, closing the door behind him. He walked to the rear of the saloon where the tinhorn was finishing counting his nights winnings.

He looked up at the son of Judge Lee, hate in his cold, bleak eyes. Hate for the man that Dale loved.

Because, in his brain, twisted by bitter prison years of suffering, had formed a desperate plan to avenge himself, pay off his bitter debt to Judge Lee and Mike McCandless, and win this girl who was the image of the woman he had so desperately and tragically loved.

That night in the hotel, Mike McCandless had called him—Luke Fox—the father of the girl. And the big saloon man had meant it. Fox had built his plan of revenge upon that foundation. He'd claim the girl as his own daughter—the illigitimate child of Dixie Dale's. The law would be forced to give her to him. No man as proud and so prominent in State affairs as was Judge Hannibal Lee, would allow his son to marry a girl of such clouded parentage. Deuce High Fox wanted Dale, and Jeff Lee stood in his way. Wild Jeff was a gambler, Dale had confided to him. He had a weakness for cards. Cards gave the tinhorn the weapon of his choice.

"Sit down, Lee," he said flatly. "The game is deuce high. It's as fast as your blood will stand."

"The stakes are high, Fox," said Jeff, sitting down across the table from the tinhorn. "Higher than you ever played for. They tell it about you, Fox, that when the Judge sentenced you ten years ago, you offered to cut cards, deuce high,

to see if you'd go free or hang. The Judge was in no position to call that bet. I am. I'm cutting cards with you, mister. Deuce high. If you lose, you'll hang."

"Hang?" Deuce High Fox spat the word through twisted lips.

"Hang," repeated Jeff Lee, watching the gambler's eyes, "for the murder of another gambler—a straight one—whom you killed in Butte in a jealous quarrel over Mrs. Mike McCandless, better known on the stage as Dixie Dale. I fetched back from Butte all the evidence needed to put a rope around your neck. I'm giving you one chance. If you win, you quit the country and never come back. You'll disappear. There's a train East in half an hour. You'll take it, catch a boat in New York for some other country. A one way ticket to oblivion if you win. If you lose—you hang."

JEFF LEE took a sealed deck of cards from his pocket, using his left hand. His right was near his gun. He had seen, for the fraction of a second, stark fear in the tinhorn's eyes. Fear of the hangman.

"This deck is brand new, Fox. Clean of markings. They won't be in your hands long enough to crimp 'em or stack 'em or switch decks like you've been doing. Your card magic will be useless. I'm shuffling the cards. I'm banking this last game of yours at Alkali. Both hands in sight on the table, tinhorn. And if one of 'em moves, I'll read the sign that you're goin' for your gun."

Deuce High Fox obeyed. Trickery, practiced card manipulating, too clever and fast for the eye to follow, had favored Deuce High Fox tonight in his winnings. But Jeff Lee was not giving him a chance to use his uncanny skill. Jeff was forcing him to play square, taking his own chance with luck.

Fear gripped Deuce High Fox that he would lose. Lose, not only his life, but the vengeance he had nursed in his hate-twisted brain during all those black hours in solitary. He had come back to Alkali to avenge himself on Mike McCandless and Judge Lee. The girl, Dale, seemed to him like a gift sent him by the devil to sweeten his revenge, to perfect it.

Jeff broke the seal on the deck and his steady, cold stare held the eyes of the gambler as he shuffled the stiff cards. He bunched the shuffled cards and put the deck in the center of the table.

"Cut 'em, Fox. Deuce is the high card. Your game."

Reddish flecks glittered in Deuce High Fox's eyes as they shifted. He saw Mike McCandless standing nearby on wide-spread unsteady legs. And there was a grin on the big saloon man's face—the grin of a man who watches an enemy go down defeated.

"Cut your card, Fox," Jeff Lee's steady, hard-toned voice brought the tinhorn's eyes to the deck in the center of the green-covered table. He stared at the cards, sweat beading his gray face. The long, white, fingers were steady as Deuce Fox reached toward the cards with his right hand, his gun-hand.

Deuce High Fox parted the deck neatly in the middle. And turned up the trey of spades. In the reverse order of the cards, it was rated the next highest card to the deuce.

The tinhorn's eyes glittered with triumph. It would take a deuce to beat him. And no gambler's fate would give Fox's lucky card, the deuce, to an enemy at a time like this.

Lip lifted in that noiseless snarl, he put the trey of spades face upward on the table and replaced the rest of the deck. His two hands rested on the edge of the table.

"Your cut, Lee." His tone was elated. He'd quit Alkali. But he'd come back some night. He'd come back....

For an instant, Jeff Lee hesitated, weighing in his mind the results of his losing this game. He felt the hopelessness of defeat, and knew that if he did lose he'd have to kill Deuce High Fox sooner or later. Because he also knew that Deuce High Fox would some day return to Alkali, to exact the vengeance which had been so long in the planning in the solitary cell at Deer Lodge. That hatred was aimed against Jeff Lee, against his father, and against old Mike McCandless. And it would also have its effect on Dale.

The tinhorn opposite him had never given any man an even break. Nor was there reason to suppose that he would do so now, if he walked away to take the East-bound train at two o'clock this morning.

Then Jeff Lee reached out and lifted the deck apart....

MIKE McCANDLESS, standing back there, a little drunk, more than a little weakened by his partial stroke, never moved his big, fat-encased body so fast since the Klondike days. He saw, in the flash of an eye-wink, the incredibly clumsy, foolhardy attempt on Jeff's part to draw from the bottom, and caught the movement of Fox's arm as the gun slid into sight. It never occurred to him then that Jeff Lee had made that awkward play in a desperate effort for a gun-showdown with the tinhorn. Had Mike realized that, he might not have chosen that time to take a hand himself. And Mike's own six-shooter was crashing toward the gambler.

But Mike was too unsteady. The tinhorn's gun came up first as he leaped back from the table, spilling the cards and knocking Jeff Lee off balance. He shot twice, and McCandless fell to the floor, coughing and cursing, close to the same sawdust-covered spot that Deuce Fox had fallen when he returned to the Last Chance.

Not one of the three men saw the girl at that moment, as she broke through the half-doors, after fighting her way through the crowd of men who had come running up outside the saloon at sound of the gun-battle. Nor did Deuce High Fox have time to do anything but shout her name before she was running around behind him, straight toward the table, behind which Jeff Lee was struggling to get up. He was pulling desperately at his gun which had jammed in the holster when he had been thrown hard against the wall.

For an instant, as Deuce Fox was turning, Dale knelt there shielding with her body the life of Jeff Lee. But only for an instant, for Jeff, with a sweeping movement, threw her off and out of the line of fire. He lurched to his feet and he looked into the icy fire-flecked eyes and the gray face of the tinhorn, and into the muzzle of the gun which was centered on him. Then the thin lips of Deuce High Fox drew back, and it seemed that some of the hardness, the bitter, twisted look went out of his eyes as a spasm of coughing jerked his body. At the same time, the gambler fired....

Jeff felt the crash of the bullet against his ribs. The flame of the gambler's gun blinded him. Powder burned his eyes. Then his six-shooter was in his hand and through the powdersmoke he was shooting at the tinhorn. He saw the gray face twisting and saw Fox's glittering eyes. Then Deuce High Fox went down, hitting the table as he fell. He coughed once more, and the spasm of his lungs choked to silence as blood came dribbling from his open mouth. Deuce High Fox was dead.

Blood, too, was streaming from Jeff's bullet-torn ribs. He stepped around the broken table, his smoking gun in his hand. His eyes were stinging from the

burned powder as he took one step to the girl, where he had shoved her against the wall. And as he saw the rush of men crowd into the smoke-laden barroom, and saw Doc Green bending over Mike McCandless, Jeff smiled. He was feeling the arms of Dale go around him, and for an instant, just before everything went black, he seemed to see again that strange softening on the gray, thin face of Deuce High Fox....

* * *

TWO months after Deuce High Fox had been laid to rest in the little boothill on the edge of town, a group of people gathered in Doc Green's house. Old Mike McCandless was taken downstairs, supported by Jeff Lee on one side and one of Jeff's cowboys on the other. Mike had been there, in the care of Ma Green and Doc since he'd gotten Deuce High Fox's bullet in his chest. And Mike, with his toupee askew as always, was chuckling to think how he'd proved Doc Green a liar by cheating the cemetery.

Senator Lee came down specially from the state capitol to be there that day. And Ma Green was busy as a hen with a brood of ducklings as she bustled about, her blue eyes dancing, her apron covered with flour, trying to be in half a dozen places at once. But she blew up when she found that Jeff Lee had slipped down into the kitchen and was helping himself to a piece of Ma's best cake.

"Too bad if a man can't swipe a piece of his own weddin' cake," he grinned, and then silenced Ma's scolding with a loud kiss which brought even a deeper flush to her apple cheeks.

So Jeff and Dale were joined in matrimony in Doc Green's little parlor, and Dale was given in marriage by her father, old Mike McCandless. It hadn't taken her long to get the truth of her parentage from Doc and old Mike—and no one was happier than that convent-bred girl when she found that she now had the best two fathers in Montana.

After the wedding, Mike McCandless had a case of his own private stock brought over, and when the toasts were being proposed, Jeff Lee got up, his hand resting lightly on his bride's slender shoulder.

He waited until the laughing and the whispering had died, then said solemnly. "Here's a toast which maybe I'll have to drink alone—but I offer it in all sincerity to a man—a straight-shooting tinhorn. I refer to Deuce High Fox."

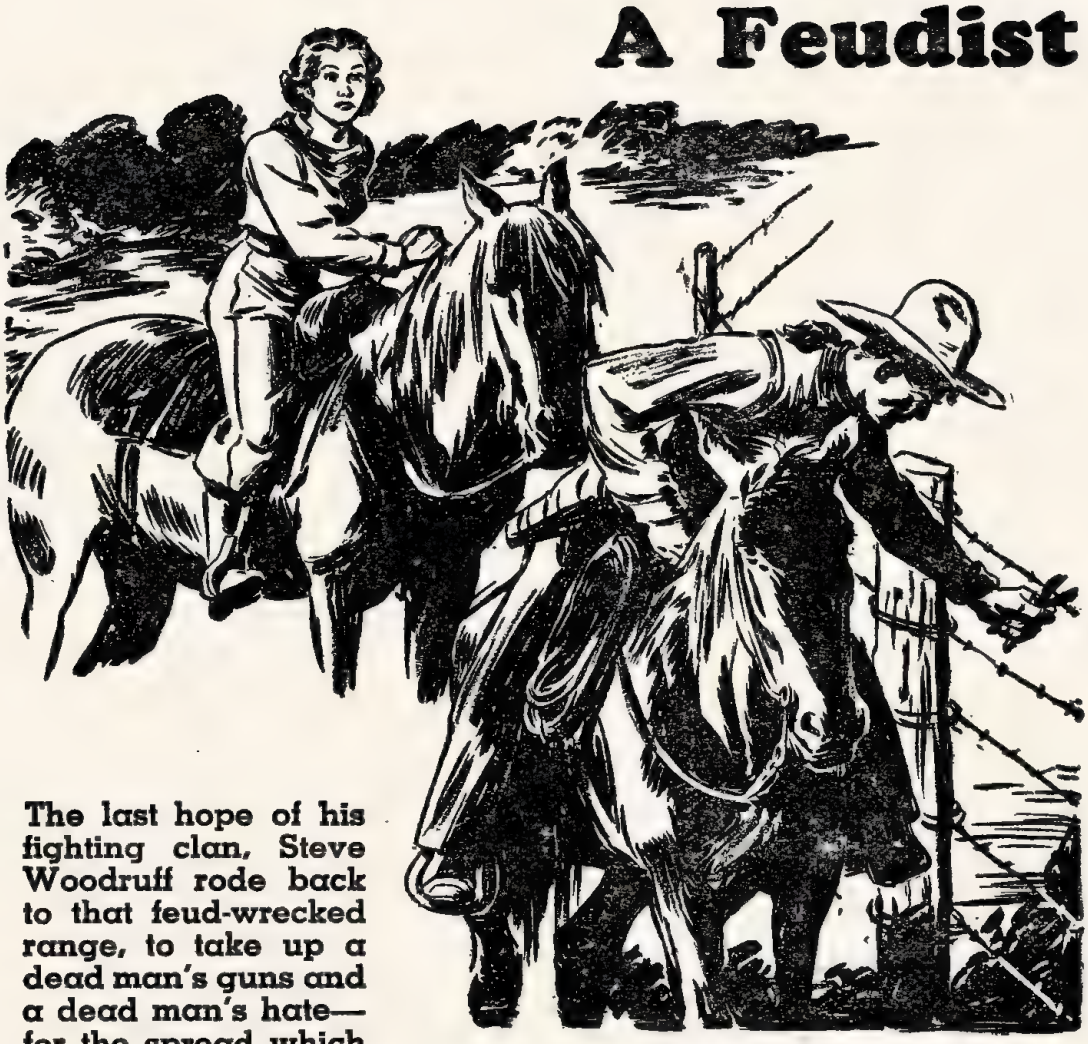
And though the toast was drunk, with half-concealed looks of wonder on the faces of many of the men there, it was not until later that Jeff Lee explained why he had given it in memory of the tinhorn who had sworn to collect payment from Jeff Lee and his friends for years of living hell.

"Deuce High Fox could have killed me with the pressure of his trigger finger, there in the Last Chance that night," Jeff Lee told Dale, when they were safely out at their ranch. "He was holding his gun straight on me, and I never had a chance. Then he started to cough. But I'd heard him cough before, and if ever a lunger faked a cough, he did it then. His hand was steady all the time—until he deliberately swung the gun so that the bullet would nick me in the ribs, instead of in the heart. He loved you, Dale. And maybe it was that love for you that saved my life . . . ."

The name of the tinhorn, Deuce High Fox, was never mentioned again out at that ranch, nor, so far as any one knew, was it mentioned in town by Doc Green or old Mike McCandless. But each year there's a fresh bunch of wild roses on the grave of Deuce High Fox, there in the little boothill, just at the edge of Alkali. . .

THE END

# A Feudist



**The last hope of his fighting clan, Steve Woodruff rode back to that feud-wrecked range, to take up a dead man's guns and a dead man's hate—for the spread which had condemned his own blood-kin to powdersmoke perdition!**

A HEAT wave held the desert ranges in its hard clutch; the hot, dry wind swirling through the cactus and creosote flats and kicking up clouds of alkali dust along Melody Town's one long street. For three long weeks the spell had lasted, burning the six-weeks grass to dry chaff, drying up the surface springs and seeps and sucking up the precious moisture in the tanks.

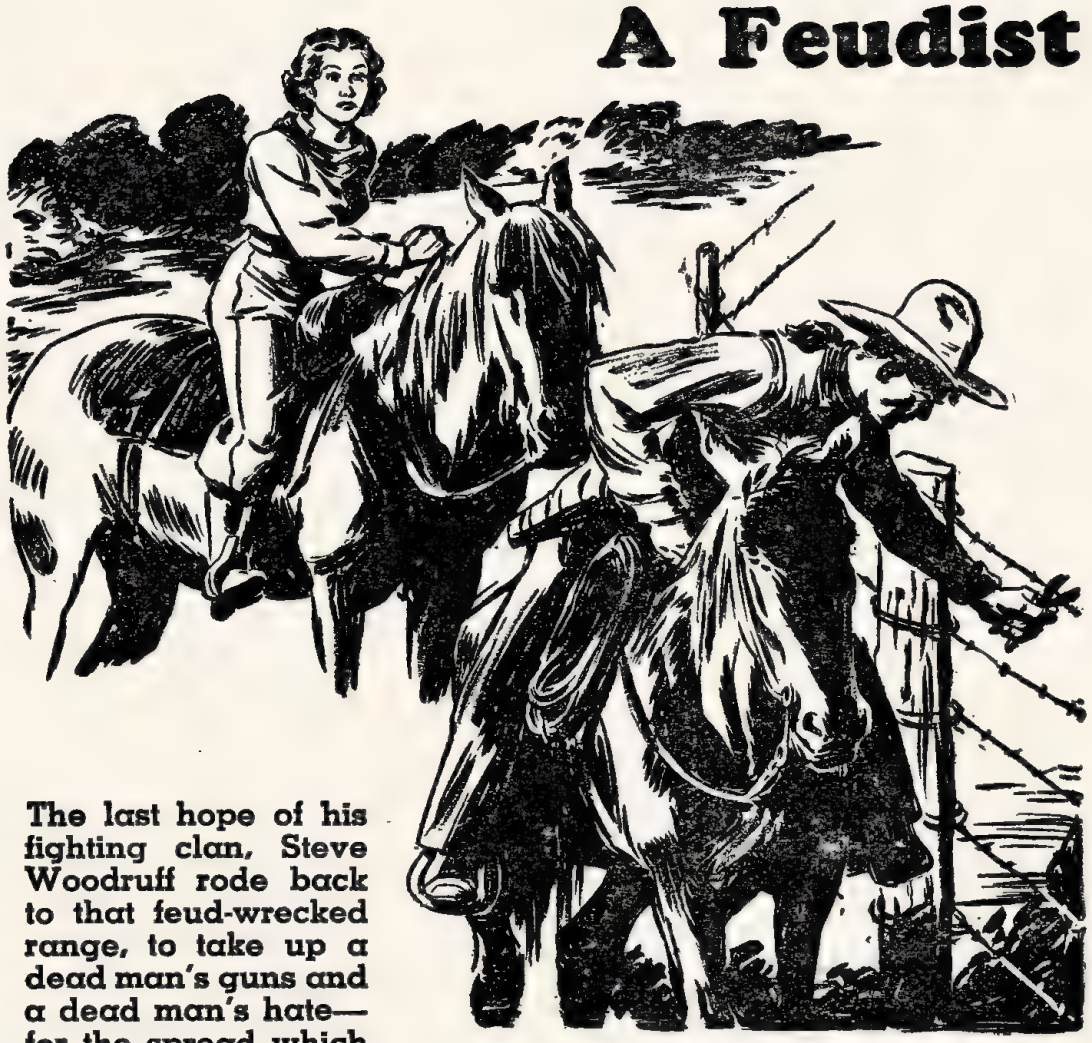
In the little cubby shop set between the Longhorn Saloon and the Mercantile Store, Baldy Sipes sat sweating, a far-away look in his faded eyes and doubt written large upon his full-moon face. For twenty years or more, men had come to Baldy with their gun troubles, for Baldy was a gunsmith, and a good one. If a weapon was worth fixing, he'd fix it. He was an inlay artist and a genius when it came to fitting a trigger pull to a man's fighting needs.

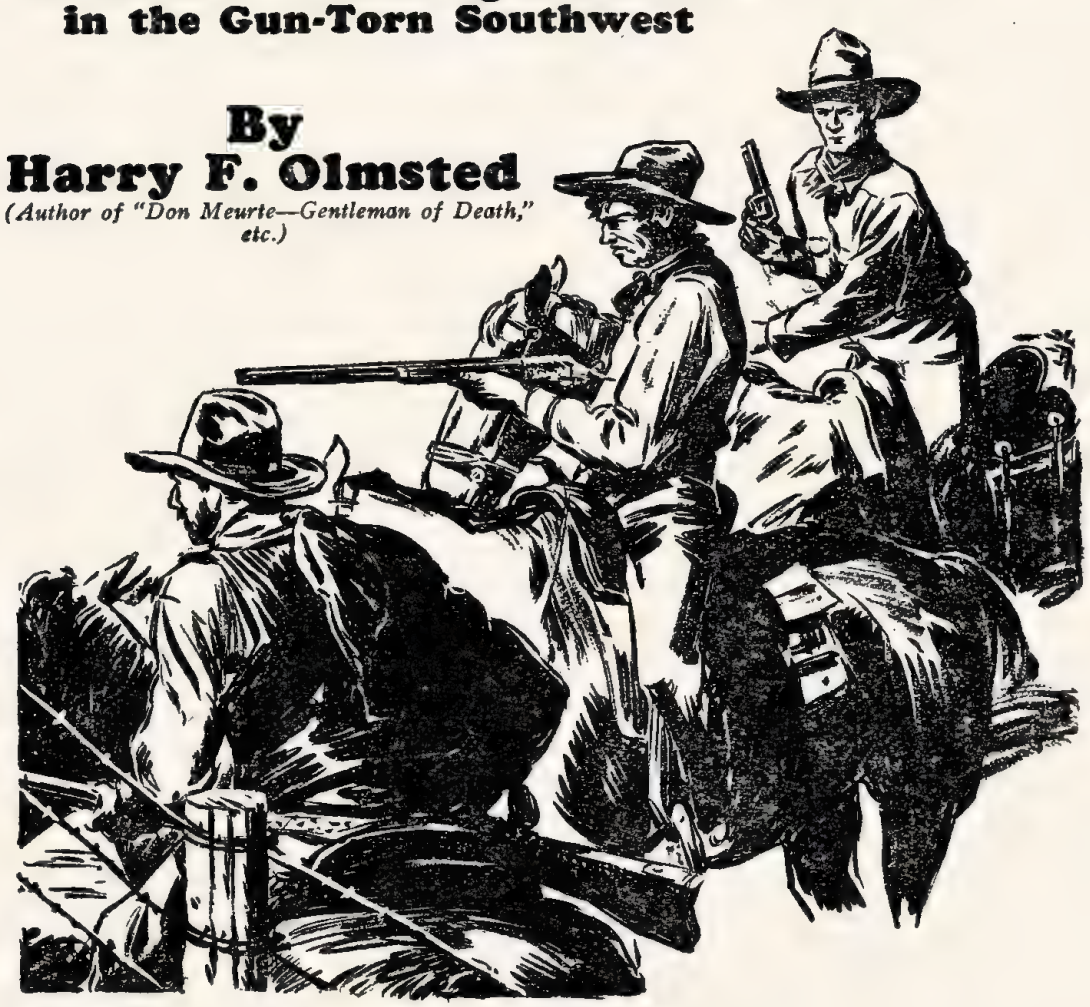
Baldy had loved his work, because he loved guns. But now, for the first time in all those years, he was feeling the pangs of uncertainty. He dropped his eyes to the twin .45's on the counter before him. Big Colts they were, with the blue worn off from holster rub. Baldy shuddered. Funny the way those guns

# A Feudist Comes Home To Die

## Novelette of Smashing Adventure in the Gun-Torn Southwest

By
**Harry F. Olmsted**
*(Author of "Don Meurte—Gentleman of Death," etc.)*





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Lost in his contemplation, Baldy Sipes was only vaguely conscious of the door opening and closing, of the musical approach of belled spurs. Two brown, muscular hands cut off the matched pistols from his sight, wrapped about the grips, lifted them from the counter. Baldy looked up.

The man before him was staring at the weapons, slow fires limning the fierce pleasure in his eyes. And Baldy warmed to this man he had never seen, because here was a lover of guns, and obviously a master with them in his hands.

With patent pleasure, he spun the weapons in the double roll, swapped them in the tricky border shift and set

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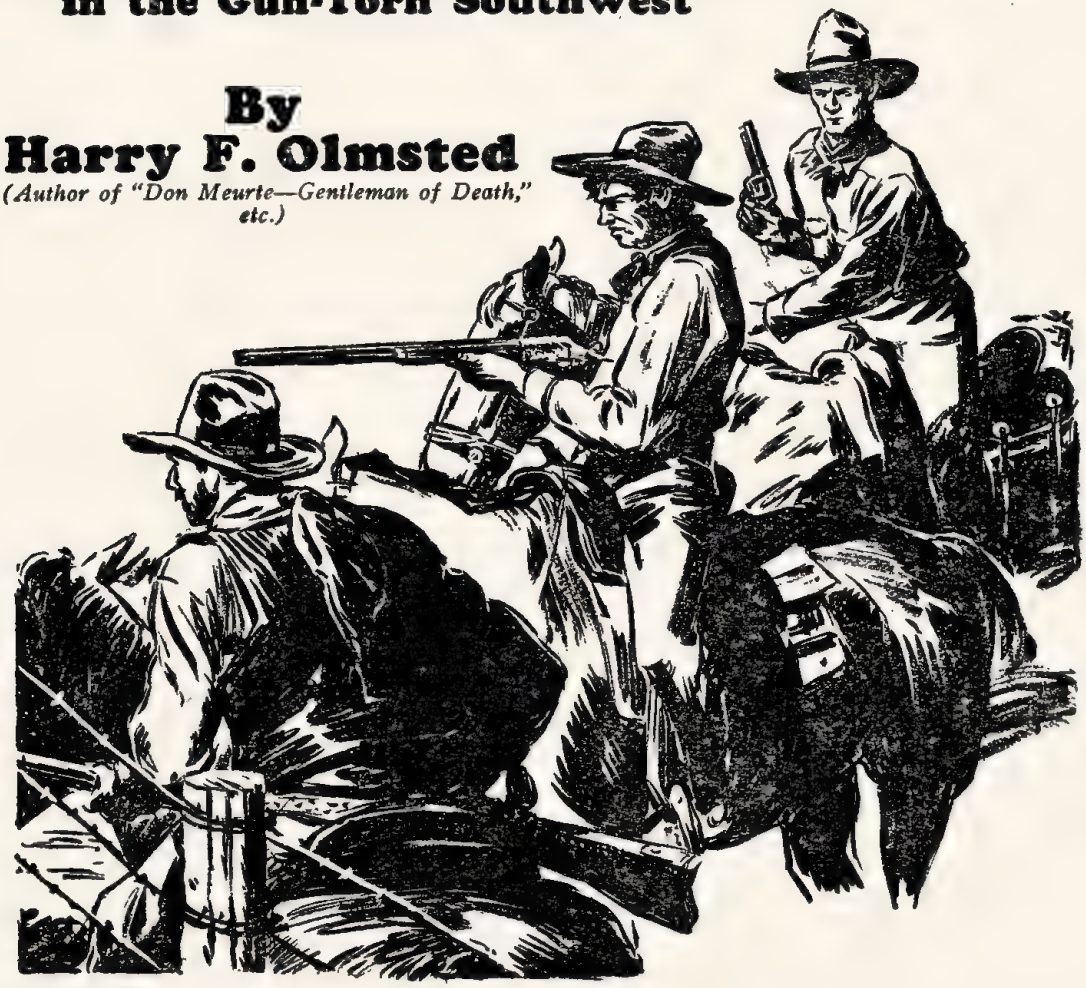

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With patent pleasure, he spun the weapons in the double roll, swapped them in the tricky border shift and set

them to whirling in the difficult reverse roll. The rhythmical ratcheting of the hammers was unbroken during the performance. Now they lay nestling in his palms.

"Nice pair of guns," the stranger observed. "What do you ask for them?"

Baldy looked at the youngster before him, failing to answer just then. He saw a wide shouldered man with inordinately slender waist and hips. A young man, lean as a range steer, who somehow gave an impression of being tall, without being above average height. A mop of moist gray hair hung from under the brim of his Stetson, giving an erroneous suggestion of age that was borne out by the bleakness of his sober eyes. Somehow Baldy knew this one had lived a lot in his meagre years.

"Them guns ain't fer sale, stranger," he said. "They're tuh give away."

"Give away?"

"Yeah. With their dead owner's heritage of hate."

The stranger didn't speak. He laid the guns down and looked questioningly at the gunsmith as he rolled a cigarette. Not long on talk, this one, but those solemn gray eyes looked a lot. And, because that was the way Baldy liked a man, he motioned his visitor to a chair and mopped his brow.

"These weapons," he murmured, reminiscently, "belonged to ol' Jake Woodruff. He bought 'em tuh answer the challenge of the Calhouns. I smoothed 'em up fer Jake an' kept 'em in shape fer him. Good man, Jake, an' a grand ol' fighter. He got his share of the Calhouns in six-seven year uh feudin', but they got him —last week. . . ."

Baldy was watching the gray haired youngster, saw him spill a little tobacco from paper, saw the flash of some deep inner emotion twitch at the lean muscles of his face. He heard the short, quick gasp of his breath and his toneless: "Gulched him?"

"No," said the gunsmith. "The Calhouns ain't that low. All their feudin' has bin open an' aboveboard. It started next door in the Longhorn, near seven year ago. Five men were killed in that ruckus —three Calhouns an' two Woodruffs. Lots has died since, an' all over a wire fence an' a unfailin' cattle tank."

ONE after another, Baldy ran over the battles of the Calhoun-Woodruff feud. He tallied the names of good men, kindly men, as fine and upstanding men as he'd ever known. But dead now—dead as hell; buried with feud lead in their vitals. All because Calhoun cows piled down off the high, dry mesas to foul a Woodruff tank. And because the Calhouns hated barb-wire.

"They met at the tank a week ago," finished the gunsmith. "An' ol' Jake fell. They brung him into town an' he called fer me. 'Baldy,' sezzee, as he was dyin', 'I've got it now—with Calhoun lead in my guts. It's my guns I called yuh in about. They're good guns, Baldy, but my hand wasn't strong enough. I wasn't able tuh lead my kin outa the feud. I'm leavin' nobody behind me that's able. Bill, my oldest, wants peace with the Calhouns, but there's no peace in them people. Bolt, my youngest, is only a wild kid that's showed no signs of leadership. My two boys, Tom an' Buck, are in gunshot graves. Kinfolks by marriage are good followers, but damn pore leaders. The only hope of the Woodruffs, Baldy, is my boy Steve—the one that left home. . . .'"

Baldy took time to tell the stranger about the boy, Steve. The one with the urge to go places and do things. The fifteen-year-old boy who had ridden away ten years before and who hadn't been heard of since. " 'I heard the boy was in Montana,' dying Jake says to me, " 'an'

I sent letters to some sheriffs up there. He'll come back home, big and strong, an' a fighter from who laid the chunk. He's like me, Baldy, only a better man than I've ever bin. He'll come back home an' bring the Calhouns to their knees. An' when he comes, give him my guns. Let 'em roar again for the Woodruffs. Will you do that for me, Baldy?'

"So that," finished Baldy Sipes, "is why you can't buy these guns, stranger. I'm holdin' 'em right here until Steve Woodruff comes an' asks for 'em."

"But suppose," drawled the stranger, "he don't ever come back?"

"Then I'll hold 'em here," murmured the gunsmith, sadly. "I'll hang 'em on the wall to remind me of a man who fought hard an' fair for his kinfolks an' for his rights."

The stranger grimaced. "Mebby if the boy did come back," he suggested, "he wouldn't be the wampoodlin' big gent his dad figgered. Mebby he wouldn't be a man who believed in feudin' or in settlin' disputes with powdersmoke."

"Hell's full of gents that believed thataway," said the gunsmith. "If Steve Woodruff's one of 'em, he won't come back. An' better so."

"I wonder," murmured the stranger.

Baldy Sipes stirred himself. "Was there something I could do for you?"

The gray-haired youngster started. "Yes," he said, and unbuckled his gunbelt. "Tear this smoke wagon down an' see what it needs. An' tell me what you'll allow for it on a better weapon. How long will it take?"

"You'll have the whole story," said Baldy, "tomorrow at this time." He fixed a tag onto the pistol. "Your name?"

"Woody Stevens," said the stranger. "I may not be in tomorrow. Don't know for certain just when I will be back. But hold it here till I come. I'm goin' out to look for a job, an' some jobs take a heap of huntin'."

The gunsmith shook his shiny, sweat-beaded head. "Cowmen is all busted around here, Stevens. They're layin' off men, right down to the quick. That is, all of 'em but the Woodruff Flyin' W an' the Calhoun Circle C. Though I don't know what they're usin' fer money, them two outfits is hirin' fightin' hands. But they ain't takin' none without two guns hung onto their laigs. You'd just be wastin' yore time."

"I wonder," said Woody Stevens again, and walked out into the sun-scourged street.

Baldy Sipes watched him through the window. The stranger walked out to the hitchbar and seemed to hold an extended conversation with his horse. After which he mounted, swung the pony and drew rein into the middle of the street. Rising in the stirrups, he stared long and studiously toward the northeast, where lay the home ranch of the Woodruff Flying W. Then equally long and equally intent, he stared toward the Circle C, which lay toward the northwest. Now he relaxed in the saddle and appeared to ponder some deep and weighty problem. Finally having apparently settled it to his satisfaction, he reined his pony about and spurred away—toward the northwest. Toward the bailiwick of the Calhouns.

Baldy chuckled. "Funny feller. Wonder what's on his mind. I got a picture of the welcome he'll git out yonder when he rides in on 'em, slick as a new-borned calf, an' faces ol' Rip Calhoun, Abijah Brass, Staghorn Soper an' the rest. They'll eat him alive, without salt. Unless . . . sa-a-ay, somethin' funny about that jasper. He's no pilgrim. I wonder what's on his mind."

Only the whine of the dry wind gave Baldy answer. And the pall of alkali dust seemed to thicken in the streets.

ACROSS a range, barren and bleak and parched by a sun that beat down with hammer-like stroke, rode Woody Stevens, who was really not Woody Stevens at all. In the many changes of ten years among strange people on strange ranges, Steve Woodruff had come to be called Woody. And Woody he had pegged himself to the gunsmith. It was just as well. In view of the things that had been going on while he was riding south from long grass ranges, it was better, perhaps, that he mask his true identity until he could find who was at fault in this range feud—and why. He was a Woodruff, and the best place to find that out, he figured, was in the camp of the enemies of all Woodruffs.

Miles laid out flat gave way to miles tipped on edge. And then Steve saw the low, flat buildings of the Circle C—snuggled in the enfolding and protecting arm of an eroded ridge, like a jewel in a tarnished setting. He liked the greenery and the cottonwood shade. It was pretty, as a siren is pretty. It was fair to behold, but dangerous. Steve hooked a knee over his saddle horn and considered his chances.

Before his lazing pony reached the barranca that lay between him and the ranch, Steve saw a rider pop over the rim, swerve his mount and spur swiftly toward him. The lone horseman was gaunt and gangling, a year or two younger than Steve and burdened with two big guns. He curbed his horse cruelly, reared him high and regarded Steve with harsh, slate colored eyes. He said: "Howdy!" nor was there a trace of friendliness in his tone.

"H'are yuh," responded Steve. "Plenty hot, no?"

"Can get a heap hotter," grunted the youngster. "What d'yuh want, an' where yuh headed?"

"I calculate some on ridin' for the Calhouns," Steve said. "Any objections?"

The rider marked Steve's lack of guns. His face warped taut; his lips curled and his piercing eyes sought Steve's armpits for the tell-tale bulges denoting Texas hideouts. He said, almost unbelievingly: "Yo're not heeled."

"Yore eyes are good," grinned Steve. "Le's get goin'. Yonder shade looks good, an' I'm right anxious to talk to Rip Calhoun."

"I'm Hez Calhoun," said the swarthy youngster. "You can't see dad. And why not, is none of yore business!"

"I wonder," mused Steve, smiling coldly, and he spurred his horse past the fellow.

Hez Calhoun stared after him for a moment. Then: "Hey!" he hollered. "Did Abijah Brass send fer you?"

"Don't know the gent," Steve threw across his shoulder.

There seemed to be something puzzling Hez Calhoun. He spurred his pony fiercely and roared past Steve, on into the barranca. Moments later, when Steve reached the rim, he saw the youngster loping hard toward the ranch.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Into the Maw

IT WAS a strangely silent layout that Steve rode into, a half hour later. Horses squealed and fought in a pole corral, but aside from that an ominous air of quiet gripped the place. Huge cottonwoods shaded a wide lane, flanked by corrals on one side and bunkhouses, shops and storerooms on the other. Following down this lane Steve came into a tree-lined quadrangle fronted by three houses and a large barn, all of which was surrounded by a high pole fence. It was like a military establishment, and Steve had the uncomfortable feeling that unfriendly eyes regarded him—over gunsights.

In front of the barn, an ancient windmill groaned wearily, as it gave to the slight breeze, and poured its meagre flow into a brimming trough. Lolling about in the damp shade of the tankhouse were half a dozen hands, fixing him with stonily direct glances. Steve swung down and stood before them on his own two feet, no reflection of his feeling in the bronzed solemnity of his face. Erect, slab-muscled, pinched in the girth, from outward appearance he was every inch a warrior.

They looked upon him with a cold appraisal, but not one of them moved or spoke. Their eyes kept darting to the larger of the three houses that fronted the quadrangle, and at last a man emerged from it, and advanced upon Steve with truculent directness. A half rod away he paused, and planted himself.

He was a thin slat of a man, with a powerful lower jaw and hollow cheeks. His black, snapping eyes were deep in his skull and his upper lip was drawn back from large, even teeth in something that might have passed for a smile, save that there was no hint of humor in it. For a long time, he studied the newcomer. Then, having apparently satisfied some deep inner suspicion, he turned his taciturn glance away from Steve.

"I've come to see Rip Calhoun," Steve said, "there's something I want to talk to him about."

A touch of color came in the man's cheeks. He said: "If it's a ridin' job yo're after, you can forget it. We're full handed."

"I want to hear Rip Calhoun say that," Steve's voice was quiet.

The man bridled. "I'm doin' the hirin' an' firin' around here," he growled. "An' I'm tellin' you how it is. I'm Abijah Brass, ramrod of the Circle C."

"I'll believe that too," replied Steve, evenly, "when Rip Calhoun tells it to me."

Gray eyes bored into black ones in a silent duel of wills. Abijah Brass was the first to drop his glance, flinging himself violently about and stalking toward the house.

"All right," he grumbled. "Come on an' see the Ol' Man. You act like he's soft mebby, or easy. You'll find out. He's a hard number, with a tongue like a lash. He'll tell yuh off."

A tide of resentment swept Steve Woodruff, and it was on his tongue to tell this man that it didn't matter, that he wanted no part of the sullen, sinister air of this seat of Calhoun power. But he was playing for big stakes, and that stayed his words. He fell into step with Abijah Brass, crossed the quadrangle and stamped up the porch steps. The Circle C ramrod entered the house without knocking, turned from a hall into a dingy room. Steve following at his heels.

A voice struck out of the gloom—a harsh, cracked voice that was a strange mixture of weariness, petulance and fiery command.

"Is that you, Abijah? Can't you do nothin' without callin' on me? Can't a man have no peace on this earth? What is it now?"

Brass answered with soft meekness: "There's a man here, Rip, that insists on seein' you about a job. He figgered I was lyin' to 'im when I said we was full up. You tell him."

Brass slid on into the room as he spoke, leaving Steve alone by the door. Peering through the half light at the bundled figure in the deep rocking chair, Steve saw a seamed and withered face, sunken eyes that stared hollowly, and unkempt white hair that straggled down over a leprous white forehead.

STEVE felt the impact of those eyes, and braced himself against their searching glance. So much depended upon the result of that close scrutiny. He had

never met Rip Calhoun, but he had seen him often in his kid days, and was shocked at the change in him. Would Old Rip recognize him? If so, Steve was prepared to ask for the Calhoun terms of peace. If not, he would try to dictate those terms. From the gloom came a gust of breath.

"Want a job, eh?" came the reedy voice of the old wolf. "Who are yuh? An' where do yuh come from?"

"Name uh Woody Stevens," murmured Steve. "From up Chinook way—in Montana."

"Montana!" Rip Calhoun snorted acridly. "Never knowed a cowboy from them parts to be wuth his salt in these ranges. Dally men—humph! So yuh want a job with the Calhouns? I wonder why. What's yore line, mostly?"

Steve sensed a trap in the question, and he stalled while he considered it. "Line? What yuh mean—line?"

"Just what I say, mister. What kin yuh do? Yo're none too big, an' us Calhouns runs to large men by preference. Yo're slick-hipped, which brands you as no part of a fightin' man. Calhouns is all fightin' men. If yuh don't believe that, go over an' ask the Woodruffs. Whatever from hell made yuh think the Circle C would sign yuh on? What good would you be to us?"

"Gents," said Steve, his momentary doubt gone, "I shore won't take out no lintels goin' out yore doors. And I'm not as wide across the pants, mebby, as you like 'em. But I'm handy with a rope, an iron, an' a gun. I dig postholes, string wire an' sing. I can ride anything with hair, an' when it comes to runnin', I most usual finishes last. That's all except that I'll travel twenty mile to avoid a ruckus, but like the tom cougar I won't back a livin' inch after I get into one."

"No dice," said the old wolf of the Circle C, scornfully. "Yo're handy with a rope an' iron—that we don't need. You ain't much shucks with a gun or you'd wear one. We've no postholes to dig an' we're fightin' a war because a pack uh fools thought they could fence off open water. Singin' is fer coyotes an' birds. An' as fer a ruckus, we go fer a man that'll run twenty mile just to git a smell uh one. Sorry, neighbor, but we can't use yuh on the Circle C."

"You asked for it, Stevens," sneered Abijah Brass. "The door's right behind yuh."

"Yes," sounded a girl's voice behind Steve. "And it's blocked, Dad, I want you to hire this man!"

Abijah Brass started, flung about. From Rip Calhoun came a plaintive, half-whining protest: "Now Tess, you take keer uh yore house an' leave the ranch to us men. This gent is one we don't know nothin' about an'—"

"Hire him!" repeated the girl. "He's a cowboy, and we need more of his kind. We have too many men sitting around the outfit, getting stoop-shouldered from wearing guns, and sweating to shed more blood. Money you're spending for powder and lead should be going for wells and tanks. Cattle should be gathered, horses driven in and broke. Leave the ranch to you men—humph! Any time I do—"

"But daughter. Lissen—"

"Hire him!"

"Thirty a month an' found, Stevens," came the dejected murmur from Rip Calhoun's chair. "An' take yore orders from Brass."

The girl's voice had drawn Steve around. She stood in the light of the door, body silhouetted, head tilted up proudly, as if defying these hard-case men and the things they were mixed in. In that moment, Steve felt he had never seen a sight so stirring, or a girl so lovely. She was tall and dark, in common with the rest of her clan. Yet she was different. And that difference

set her apart from her kin—and above them.

She turned her eyes to Steve—expressive hazel eyes, they were, darkly lashed—and for a long moment she studied him minutely. Steve felt the force of her sweep through him. He saw the hardness melt from her glance, saw it turn soft and gentle in a way that stirred his blood. In that instant she was a woman—alone in a man's world. The next she was again dominant.

"Mister Stevens," she said, sternly. "You will take orders from me, not from Abijah Brass. You will be working cows, not fighting. Don't forget that, please."

Steve said: "Thank you, ma'am," as she turned out of the doorway. He would have left the room then, save that Abijah Brass called his name.

"Stevens! Tess Calhoun's a stubborn fool, and queer in her ways. Pay no heed to her or what she says."

"Yes," concurred Rip Calhoun. "My daughter's queer. I allus humor her, though, so I'll hire you on. But pay no attention to what she tells yuh. A petticoat never run the Circle C, an' one ain't gonna start to now."

AFTER a restless night, Steve Woodruff rose at dawn with the rest of the men and went into the chuckhouse for breakfast. None of the men were more than civil to him. A clanny, sullen and dangerous outfit, was his verdict.

One large table was spread and the odors of bacon and spuds and black coffee filled the long room to its low-raftered ceiling. The brothers and cousins of Tess Calhoun, and the fighting hands, buried their faces in their plates, bolting their food and taking covert stock of the newcomer. And Tess, herself, presided at the head of the board, as strangely foreign to it all as is a waxy bloom on a spiny cactus. Only Old Rip Calhoun was missing.

Several times during that meal, Steve caught the girl looking at him, quizzically, as if she were trying to probe beneath his calm. And each time that he met that glance, the girl flushed and looked away. It was a silent meal and soon finished. With little talk having passed and no joviality, they commenced to file out. Steve pushed back his chair and walked to the porch, pausing there to roll and light a cigarette. The first rays of the rising sun were striking through the trees and Abijah Brass' shadow gloomed them.

"Stevens," Brass said, arrogantly, "you 'lowed you was handy with a gun. How handy?"

The men, grinning broadly, had turned to watch the humiliation of the new hand who scorned to wear a pistol. Steve was stirred by the gloating in the ramrod's eyes.

"Who's to judge whether I'm handy or not?" he demanded. "Who's the big curly wolf in the shootin' line hereabouts?"

Brass swelled. "Yo're lookin' right at him, Stevens," he boasted. "I rod the Circle C gun crew an' I'm top dog." He swept his hand at the men. "Ask them. They'll tell you who killed Jake Woodruff—gun boss of the flying W. Yep, yo're lookin' at a man who can draw an' shoot with the best."

Steve struggled for composure. Here, before him, stood the man who had killed his father. A hot fury boiled in him at the thought. After a pause, he said: "All right. You be the judge. Show me something to match."

Brass grinned, raised his voice. "Jack, hand this gent yore gun. Then toss up a couple of cans."

Casually a stony-faced gunman passed Steve his .45, and palmed a pair of milk cans from a nearby trash pile. Winking at Abijah Brass, he tossed them suddenly into the air. The ramrod crouched, shot his hands to holster, tilted the barrel of

his lifting gun. Two swift shots rang out. Lead spanged against light metal, and the cans flashed away at grotesque angles.

Abijah Brass reholstered the weapon and grinned with pride. "How's that, Montana man?"

"Tol'able," conceded Steve. "Now toss me a couple."

The man called Jack stood with two cans palmed, poised for the throw. They left his hand, but not because he had thrown them. One instant Steve had been standing with his gun gripped awkwardly. The next, he had fired—twice.

No one saw him move his hand, yet the cans were gone from Jack's palms, smashed away by accurately driven lead, and the fellow was staring foolishly at his stinging fingers. Steve didn't quit at that. The pistol was spinning around his trigger finger, spitting flame at each turn. And those two cans were humping along the ground—lead driven.

Gun empty, Steve looked into the startled eyes of Abijah Brass. The man gulped, then affected a gay smile. "Pretty good," he applauded. "Not bad at all."

But there was no gloating in Steve. He was suddenly hard, as he had never been before. "Listen, Brass," he said, chopping out each word with staccato emphasis. "Don't forget that I can do the same any time, any place an' under any conditions. Don't forget that—ever."

He passed over the gun, turned to the porch where Tess stood pale and frightened. He said: "Ready to go to work, ma'am. What's yore orders for the day?"

She looked at him with heavy, solemn eyes. And before she could speak, a thin, plaintive voice came from the house. "Brass! What was that shootin' about, Brass?"

And Brass answered, his voice husky with a rage that lit his dark eyes with leaping fires: "Tryin' out a gun, Rip. Just tryin' out a gun."

"And a man," murmured Tess Calhoun to Steve, who had paused before her. She said it sadly, as if she, too, knew that in thus humiliating Abijah Brass, the man from Montana had made a deadly enemy. "Take the west trail, Stevens," she said loud enough for all to hear. "Ride the breaks of the high mesa and report on where our horses are grazing."

## CHAPTER THREE

### Gun Clans Gather

THE men were still standing about when Steve rode out of the compound and toward the uplands. He was scarcely two miles from the ranch when Tess rode up to join him. Her eyes were condemning, and she came right to the point.

"I—I was disappointed in you back there, Stevens," she said. "When you came to the Circle C, without a gun, I had hopes. Those hopes just about died after seeing you—like you were—a gunflash. Pride showed in your work, and when you told off Abijah Brass, your eyes were the eyes of a killer. You lifted my hopes so high, then let me down. Why did you come to the Circle C without a gun? Why?"

Steve hung his head at her vehemence. "Because," he murmured. "I had come to hate guns an' all that they stand for. I had put them behind me. Guns never settled anything in this world. Brass lives and breathes the spirit of the gun code. There's a streak in him that crosses all that is good in me. If you saw killer in me when I looked at him, it's because he'll force a gun into my hand—and I'll have to kill him."

Doubt mingled with belief, in her hazel eyes. "But, Stevens," she protested. "I heard you boast of your skill with guns, among other things, when you hit dad up for a job."

"That," he confessed, miserably, "was only to get the job. I knew they swore by gun medicine. And I had to have the job."

"Why?" she demanded.

"I'll tell you why," he blurted out, recklessness warping his usual caution. "I felt if I could ride with this outfit, I could mebbyso change them from wolves—to men. That mebby I could do my little bit to'rds fetching a lasting peace to this wartore range, peace based on friendship an' trust an' understanding, peace bought with personal sacrifice instead of blood. I guess I was crazy."

"No," she protested, and her eyes were shining, her breath coming a little faster. "Not crazy—unless I too am crazy. I couldn't have said it the way you have, but that's just how I feel about the Calhoun-Woodruff feud. I—I thought I was alone, struggling hopelessly against the savagery of these men." Her oval face contorted, and her eyes were hard. "What has war brought us? Bankruptcy. Grief. Death. My mother lies down yonder in her grave, dead of a broken heart. Two of my brothers lie beside her—killed with Woodruff lead. My father, once the proudest, strongest man in the county, is a broken invalid—rocking-chair bound for the rest of his days because of a bullet in his spine. And still they cry for war and more war! I've questioned myself and lost heart, but all along I've dreamed of a man who would come to help me. Will you help me do the thing you want to see done, Stevens?"

She asked it in the way women have appealed to men since the dawn of time, with a confession of feminine weakness that demands the strength of a man to lean upon. It struck something deep down inside Steve, drove the blood pulsing in his veins. In his long wandering, he had seen all manner and type of women, but never one that moved him like Tess Calhoun. In a choked voice, he said:

"Of course I will, ma'am. But what of this man Brass? Without him, peace is possible. But with him, it's only a dream. He stands in the way. Why is he ramrod of the Circle C? What is he to you?"

"My cousin," she murmured. "A son of my mother's sister." But the way she flushed and hung her head, Steve knew there was more than just a blood tie to be considered. Steve had sensed it in the patronizing way Abijah Brass acted toward the girl. Brass intended to have her for his own, and thus further intrench himself in the councils of the Calhouns.

Steve felt a strange sinking in his heart. Morosely he said: "I'm sorry to hear that, ma'am. Brass will never give in. Which makes him a blood wall between partners."

"You spoke of a peace based on personal sacrifice, Stevens," she reminded him.

It picked Steve up. He grinned, and stuck out his hand. "It's a go, ma'am. You can count on me to the last drop uh blood."

They shook, and she wheeled her pony and loped back to the ranch. And thereafter she managed to ride with him for part of each day at least. It wasn't in the cards that Abijah Brass shouldn't know. He warned Steve about it.

"Pay no attention to what she tells you, Montana-man," he rasped one morning. "An' don't get fool notions about her purty face. See that cabin yonder? Well, it's mine. An' she's gonna be mindin' it for me."

Steve laughed in Brass' face, and continued to meet the girl, who had grown to mean more to him now than he was willing to admit even to himself. But the men, too, were talking about it. One evening Steve came in late. The boys were playing poker in the bunkhouse when he rolled in. One of them, a burly gunman, lifted taunting eyes.

"Well," he chortled. "Here comes our petticoat cowpuncher."

Steve didn't speak. Three long strides took him to the card table. He caught the big man by the throat, lifted him from his seat, rushed him to the wall and drove a rock-hard fist into the bawling man's face. He smashed him again and again—until the man moaned between split lips and sank inertly to the floor.

Then Steve faced the rest, a sneering grin upon his face. They had all risen, reached for their guns. But that's as far as they went. Steve was unarmed. They all had respect for the gun code, and no one of them had a taste for the Montana man's bitter medicine. The new apellation died a-borning; no one ever called him "petticoat cowpuncher" again.

SO FAR, in their talks Steve and Tess had arrived at no workable plan for winning a fair and lasting peace. The girl was working on Old Rip Calhoun, who was dependent upon her for his every need. But he was stubborn, and a fighter, unwilling to give in. She was losing hope.

All the while Abijah Brass was urging the old man to carry the war to the Woodruffs, to tear down the offending wire fences, and throw the Frog Tank open to the suffering Circle C cattle. The drouth was holding on. Every barranca held the bones of dead cow critters. Something had to be done. It was the economic need more than his fluency that won the point for Brass. He was grinning as he rose that night at the supper table.

"Boys," he said, fiercely, "I've talked it all out with Rip. He's given the word. At dawn tomorrow, we'll ride to the Tank, rip out the wire an' take good care of any Woodruffs that happen to be skulkin' there. We've dallied long enough. Ketch up yore fastest ponies an' grain 'em. Oil up guns an' fill yore loops. Stevens—" his eyes were gloating as he fixed them on the Montana man—"tomorrow yo're workin' for the Circle C—not for Tess Calhoun. You'll take a rifle from the bunkhouse an' be ready to die fer yore outfit, like any good cowboy should. At dawn tomorrow, we leave here. That's all."

Steve heard Tess' gasp of dismay and he tried to comfort her with his eyes. He had undertaken this crazy thing confidently enough, never once allowing the grisly ghosts of disaster to dim his hopes. But now he was face to face with reality. This move meant a reopening of the war. If Abijah Brass had his way, there would be murder at the tank at dawn. It might be Steve's own brother that would be killed. Shaken to his soul, torn with a thousand crazy plans, he went out into the night to smoke and think. Tess found him there.

"Don't worry, partner," she whispered, and touched his shoulder with her fingers. "I'm afraid, deathly afraid. They've outvoted me. But I'm more determined than ever. I'll not be gone long."

He wanted to ask her what she meant, but she had slid away in the darkness. There was a muted rising of hoof echoes as she cat-footed a pony away from the corral. Then she was gone. And Steve's fears were no longer for his own kin. They were for her. And he knew then that he loved her, fiercely, desperately, hopelessly. And by his very deception he had lost her.

A LATE moon threw a broad beam across the placid surface of Frog Tank. The east was graying with the dawn, and the silence was unbroken save for the bawling of thirsty cattle on the Circle C side of the fence and the mournful matin of a coyote on some distant *loma.*

The Calhoun riders came in a body, like ghosts in the moonlight. Abijah Brass

in the van, Tom, Dan, and Hez Calhoun at his flank, a dozen gunfighters following, and Steve and Tess fetching up the rear. Neither Brass, Old Rip Calhoun, nor Steve had marshalled arguments to deny the girl the privilege of riding with them.

Five strands of barb wire halted them. Strands of hate, barbed with death.

"Cut it!" commanded Abijah Brass, and the night calm was sundered by the *twang* of parting wire. It happened then. Much like an echo, the hemming brush gave off the ominous clicking of gun hammers being drawn back. Those at the fence stiffened in their saddles, and swung toward the sound. A figure stood forth in the moonlight, hand lifted high.

"Stay yore hands, you Calhouns!" he cried, and a score of rifle barrels twitched at the edge of brush. "You come here with war in yore necks. Well, get it out! Go for a gun or cut another strand uh wire an' you'll die every one."

Abijah Brass swore softly, then called out: "You've got us, Woodruff. What do you want?"

"Peace!" bellowed Bill Woodruff, leader of the clan. "If I'd wanted war, I could have won it right here, and you know it. I knew you were coming an' prepared for it. I don't aim to take advantage of it—unless you do."

In the growing dawnlight, Abijah Brass shot a narrow look at his followers. "We've a traitor amongst us," he muttered, and his eyes hung for a long moment on Steve. "One of us is playin' with the Woodruff's. Cuddlin' a snake to our bosoms. Abijah Brass kills his own snakes." To Bill Woodruff, he called, "Talk on, feller. You interest me."

"To end this war, Brass," Bill Woodruff went on, "I'm goin' three quarters of the way. I'll throw Frog Tanks open to Calhoun cattle, tear down the wire an' restore the open range. But first you Calhouns must put down ten wells on the flats, build mills over 'em an' troughs to water yore stock. That's our offer, Brass. Take it or leave it."

Steve was proud of his brother Bill in that moment. Bill, whom his dad had said was gutless and lazy and worthless. Bill, whose mind had turned to book learning and the scientific breeding of cattle and horses. Bill, who would never fight and whose whole life had been clouded by ridicule and a war he detested, had now, at last assumed leadership, and was girding his loins to fight—for peace.

Steve was proud too of Tess Calhoun as she prompted the scowling, fretful Abijah Brass. "It's a fair offer, Abijah," she called softly. "And somehow we can do it. Take him up."

The man whirled upon her, all the savagery of his character drawn to the surface.

"Hold yore peace, woman!" he growled. "This is man's business, an' men will handle it." And then, turning back to the Woodruffs, he said hotly: "What you offer is nothin'! Nothin' at all. We ask our rights in Frog Tanks, which we've used all these years—and you tell us to sink wells. What's fair about that?"

"What's fair about your hordes of thirsty cattle roaring down to ruin the tank for us all?" countered Bill Woodruff. "You heard our offer, Brass. What's the answer, yes or no?"

"No!" roared Brass. "We'll have no part of it!"

"Then make yore fight!" hollered Bill Woodruff, and stepped back into the brush.

"In my own good time," retorted Abijah Brass, chokingly. "Come on, men."

He led his followers back the way he had come. The muzzles of the hidden Woodruff riflemen followed his going, but no shot rang out to blast the still, dawn air. And so, balked for the moment,

the Circle C warriors came home to the compound in the cottonwoods.

Steve was depressed, and Tess was angry. No sooner had they dismounted at the barn than the girl rushed to be first to tell Old Rip. But Abijah Brass was right behind her, and the old wolf of the Circle C was a lot more interested in what his foreman had to report than in the girl's protests. Hell no, he wouldn't build a lot of windmills just to please the Woodruffs. To hell with 'em. Let them tear down their wire. Let 'em come to him with clean hands an' beg for what they got, the skunks.

Tess was dejected when she emerged. "I guess it just isn't in the cards," she told Steve. "They're ribbing it up now to commence killing again. It's hopeless."

"Nothin's hopeless," countered Steve. "Let's take a walk an' turn it over some."

She nodded, and they moved off through the trees, pausing where the early sun struck warmly against the stockade. Tess was close to tears and Steve ached to comfort her. His face was pale and strained as he put emotion aside, as he strengthened himself for the request he was about to make. It was a thing that was unfair to her. It was a matter of personal sacrifice. Yet. . . .

"Tess," he said, huskily. "There's only one way. Marry me! Join these two warring outfits in a tie greater than hate!"

She lifted her slight shoulders, looked at him with sober, questioning eyes. "You mean, Stevens," she asked, tonelessly, "that—?"

"Just a bargain," muttered Steve, and he dragged the words from his soul. "Just a business bargain between you an' me. I'll shoot square with you this time, Tess. Up to now, I've been livin' a lie. I'm not Woody Stevens. I'm—I'm Steve Woodruff!"

"I know it," she admitted. "That's why I've always called you Stevens."

SOMEHOW it didn't surprise Steve as it should have. To him this girl was already on a pedestal. That she had read his mind, his innermost secret, could not lift her higher. Like a man who was afraid he'd forget his lines, Steve stumbled on.

"I didn't come here to spy, ma'am. My family hasn't seen me for ten years. They don't know I'm in the country. I figgered that comin' here to work for the Calhouns was my best chance of findin' who was at fault in this feud, an' what could be done to heal the breach. Mebby if the families was joined like I said, they'd let their hackles lay an' become men instead of wolves. After the peace, I'll ride away an' make you free again."

Gloomy shadows curtained her eyes. "You—you'd ride away?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'll ride back to Montana an' never bother you no more. Is it worth tryin'?"

"Yes," she said, impulsively. "It is. And we'll do it."

Their hands met in a clasp, and Steve's fingers lingered in hers.

"What about yore family?" he asked.

"Dad," she said, thoughtfully, "won't stand in the way of my happiness, nor will my brothers. Abijah Brass will be the only one we'll have to fight. He's intent on marrying me, even though I am his first cousin. I'll have to have help against him, Steve."

"You'll get it," said Steve, grimly, and he knew the time would soon be at hand when he and Brass must face one another. "What about the weddin'?"

"Leave that to me," she said, wanly, and turned away from him, her eyes swimming with tears.

Steve looked after her, torn with conflicting emotions. Her shoulders were bowed and shaken with sobs, and he knew then what a terrible thing it was for Tess to have to go through with this mockery.

He wondered if it were worth the price to her, even if the plan did give birth to peace.

Thoughtfully he walked back to the quadrangle. Abijah Brass strode to meet him, white about the mouth, his nostrils quivering with rage. "So-o-o," he snarled. "You was out there with her, eh? Usin' every chance to spark her while I'm where I can't look after her. I've warned you before. An' this is the last time. Keep away from my woman or I'll—"

"How far you willin' to go to keep us apart, Brass?" asked Steve, softly.

"Next time I know of it," promised the foreman, with deadly emphasis, "I'm neckin' you to a hitchbar an' takin' a blacksnake whip to yore bare hide. An' I'll repeat the dose until you'll be glad to strap on a gun. An' when you do that, I'll kill yuh."

Trembling with emotion, Brass whirled on his heel and stomped away. Steve watched him go, and his eyes were broody and morose. He murmured: "I fought it out with myself an' left my gun in the shop—forever as I thought. The thing I aim to do is wrong, mebby, an' I shouldn't do it. But folks that want peace are entitled to peace. I'll have to strap it on again. I'll have to fight it out with him."

The thought made Steve's face settle, and his eyes became bleaker. If he won, he lost. For the agony of Abijah Brass' bullet could hardly be as bad as knowing that he had forever reared a blood wall between himself and the girl he loved.

"Till death do us part," he laughed bitterly, and he wondered if that might not be the easier and better way.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### One Man Wins a War

A STIR went through the Circle C, the day the parson of Melody Town came on his regular call. "My friend," he told Old Rip Calhoun, "I want you and all your outfit to come to my church tomorrow. I'll have the leader of the Woodruffs on hand with a move for peace you cannot reject. You know me,. and you know that I would not propose anything that would be bad for anyone. There will be only this man and myself present, but I want you all there to have a voice in the proceedings. What happens there will bring the two biggest outfits in this county together, and people will hail you for halting this waste of energy and money and life. Will you come?"

That was the beginning of the battle, a battle that took the best logic and most eloquent pleading that the parson of Melody Town could command. Abijah Brass was vehement in his opposition to the plan, and Old Rip Calhoun was not much more sympathetic, but in the end the warped old wolf of the Circle C gave in.

"All right," Old Rip cried, suddenly. "All right. I'll go down to yore danged ol' *wau-wau,* Parse. I'll fetch down my hull outfit, heeled fer battle, just in case them snake-trackin' Woodruffs is trickin' yuh. I'll have a couple uh my boys lug me into the Hassayampa Saloon fer a look on the likker that's red. I'll put this dead foot uh mine on the brass rail an' down a snort like I was still the man Woodruffs damned to a livin' hell. Then, by cracky, I'll come down to yore church tuh hear Bill Woodruff crawl. But mind yuh, Parse—no soul liniment."

The parson promised and rode away, smiling a calm, triumphant smile. And somehow, in that moment, Steve felt only pity for his brother, Bill. It was about as tough a chore as he could think of, trying to force peace on Old Rip Calhoun —and Abijah Brass.

IT WAS mid-forenoon the next day, when the Calhoun outfit came sweeping into Melody Town at a free run, the

sound of hoofs and the creaking of gear rising and vanishing in the hot, sultry air. Tess Calhoun was tooling the top-buggy that held Old Rip, the old wolf looking like a mummy, bundled and wrapped as he was. Abijah Brass, sneering and scornful, was leading the grim-eyed and heavily-armed warriors of the Circle C.

At the rack of the Hassayampa Saloon, they drew rein and tied their ponies. Two men lifted Old Rip from the rig and carried him inside. The men followed, Abijah Brass herding them inside, but paying no heed whatever to Tess.

Her lips trembled as she said: "Go on in with them, Steve. I'm all right."

"I'm not in a drinkin' mood," he told her soberly. "I'm thinkin' about my brother, Bill; sorta feel sorry for him."

"He won't be here, Steve. You've got only yourself to worry about."

Steve stared at her. "But I thought they said—"

"We meet with the leader of the Woodruffs," she filled in. "That's you, Steve. This is our time. The parson, alone knows it. Here's the way it'll happen. When they go into the church and are seated, we'll follow and walk up to the parson. He'll marry us, and then. . . ."

From the saloon came the two men carrying Old Rip. And then Abijah Brass saw Steve and came directly over to him. His eyes were hard, and swift cruelty came to his lips.

"Stevens," he snapped, "we've got a traitor in this outfit, an' I've had my own ideas as to who it is. Could I have proved it, I'd have killed him. However, you ain't a Calhoun an' you ain't a fightin' man. So you'll stay outside the church—with the horses!"

A quick gasp escaped Tess. "But Abijah!" she cried. "He—"

"You should be at home—in a woman's place," Brass broke in arrogantly. "But in order to keep you away from this hombre, I'll take you into the church. C'mon."

There was a stiffening of Steve's body. He turned his eyes from Tess, flexed the fingers of his right hand. "The play is up to me, I reckon," he said, cryptically. And he strode along the walk, and turned abruptly into Baldy Sipes' gun shop.

Baldy lifted his eyes from his work. "Hello, Stevens," he said, shifting a huge quid and spitting. "Thought mebby you was dead. Sa-a-ay, about that gun uh yor'n. Can't figger why you fetched it to me. It's a fine gun, an' in perfect condition—even cleaned an' oiled. Nothin' I can do to it. A weepon like that would test any man's speed to match it."

"It'll have to," said Steve, grimly. "Let me have it; I'm in a hurry. What do I owe yuh?" And in a moment Steve had strapped on the gun and tied it to his thigh.

Steve stalked down the walk now, toward the church. The Calhoun crowd was all inside. Steve didn't hesitate. He turned through the wide church door to stride down the center aisle.

"WHERE'S this whinin' Bill Woodruff, Parse?" demanded Old Rip, his voice echoing hollowly through the cloister.

No one answered him. Steve, with Tess on his arm, came striding down the aisle, his heels clicking, his spurs singing. The Circle C men twisted in their seats, starting at sight of the man and the girl instead of the expected representative of the Flying W.

"What in the hell's this?" blatted Old Rip.

Only the murmuring of his own men gave answer. Abijah Brass stood up, his black eyes glittering, his heavy shoulders settling doggedly. All eyes were upon the

big gun nesting so startlingly at the thigh of the Montana man.

And so, with no hand moving to restrain them, Steve and Tess moved past those staring eyes to pause before the parson. The holy man stood above them, an open prayer book opened in his white palms.

"Dearly beloved . . ," his voice rolled sonorously through the stillness. "We are gathered here in the sight of God to witness. . . ."

"Steven Woodruff!" bawled Old Rip Calhoun, his voice rough-edged with strain. And then again: "Say, what in the hell is this?"

Tess' reply was touched with desperation: "This is a wedding, Dad. You promised you'd respect my will in that—and a Calhoun never breaks his word. Please don't interfere."

The ceremony proceded until the parson said: ". . . and now, if any man can show just cause why these two may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or forever after hold his peace."

For an instant an utter silence held the group, a silence broken by a hard hand slapping a leather holster, and by the rattle of Abijah Brass' spurs as he stamped up the aisle and out of the church. Steve knew he would be waiting out there, waiting with his arrogant and cruel confidence, guns ready, for the ceremony to be over.

Steve was trembling, but only because the parson was saying: ". . . forasmuch as these two have consented. . . . I pronounce them man and wife. Amen." And Tess was looking up at Steve, smiling with wistful invitation. Steve kissed her, impersonally, on the forehead, and the two of them turned to face Old Rip Calhoun.

The wolf of the Circle C had a grin on his lips. With no animosity, he said: "I didn't think a Woodruff had the guts to do what you just done, son. You fooled me, entire. Far as you've gone, you've earned her. From here out—well, that's between you an' Brass. If Kitten here wants it thataway, I hope you win the peace you brung us down here to witness. Tess, you stay here with yore dad while yore man steps out to talk with Abijah."

"My place is at his side," retorted the girl, and she was walking beside Steve as he stalked up the aisle. Her voice was taut as she asked: "Is there some way to avoid this, Steve? No matter how it goes, we sacrifice all that we've gained. If we want peace—"

"There is no peace," retorted Steve, without shifting his eyes from the door, "until it's settled between him an' me." His arm went out to brush her behind him. "Some of these gents are Brass' gunhounds. If you want to be a widow, go back to yore father. If not, watch my back." Then he stepped across the threshold into the street.

The speed of Steve's exit saved him. Abijah Brass stood at the corner of the church, stiff and formidable and brazenly unafraid. He hadn't drawn. He stood with a saturnine sneer upon his lips.

"So you were the spy?" he challenged.

"I was the spy," confessed Steve Woodruff. "An' I spiked yore play at keepin' this war goin', Brass."

"As close as yore smoky-eyed dad did, Woodruff. A bullet has the last say in this business. Well, why don't you start goin'?"

"I'll give you an even break, Brass."

ABIJAH BRASS stepped back a pace, his heavy jaws working, his black eyes like two gleaming beads. "I need no favors from yore kind, you sneakin', belly-crawlin' son!"

Steve watched Brass' poised hand fall, falter a split second at the holster and

rise again. He delayed his own play until the killer's weapon was full upon him, until his twisted face was alight with the consciousness of victory. That savage grin was frozen on Brass' face when Steve fired.

Brass must have missed the flash of Steve's draw, and his hard pride struggled now against the knowledge that he had been hit. But that pride could not save the blood that was oozing away with his fast ebbing strength. Staggering, he spun about and fell.

The echo of that one gun-blast had hardly died away before the Circle C men were stamping down the church aisle toward the door. Six-shooters gleamed as they flashed from the holsters.

But a girl blocked the way, and Tess Calhoun's shrill voice rang challengingly. "Back, all of you! He's my man, and I'll kill the first one who tries to get him!"

"An' if that's the way my kitten wants it," came Old Rip's cracked snarl, "that's the way it is. Ground yore cutters, gents."

And Steve was warmed as he stood there, his gray eyes losing their fires. He had strapped on his gun again to fetch peace; now the Calhouns were drawing theirs to maintain it, and disarming the few gunmen who raised any objection. He was content.

A wave of talk swirled through Melody Town. And Steve lifted his eyes to see Baldy Sipes clumping down the walk toward him, his homely face twisted in a wide grin, his arms freighted with the twin gun-belts of the dead boss of the Flying W—Old Jake Woodruff.

"Bless you, boy!" Sipes cried, fervently. "I knowed you'd do it, 'cause I knowed all the time you was Steve Woodruff. Can't blame a man fer wantin' his own weapon, but you wouldn't uh bin disappointed in these of yore dad's. It's fittin' that you strap 'em on now, son."

"Not now, or ever," said Steve, grimly. "Hang 'em on yore wall, Sipes, an—" he was unbuckling his own belt—"hang this alongside 'em."

The gunsmith looked shocked for the moment but held silent as Tom and Dan Calhoun came up carrying Old Rip between them. Their guns were drawn and their eyes were on the disarmed and crestfallen gunmen of the Circle C who were scuttling to their horses to escape from a changing scene. Old Rip wet his cracked lips, and grinned at the gunsmith. "Baldy," he said, stoutly. "The Calhouns an' the Woodruffs have kept you in business for a long time now. But that's over an' done. If you still want our trade, you better lay in a stock of windmills."

That was a Calhoun promise, and a Calhoun always kept his word. Satisfied, Steve turned to the church door where Tess stood with wistful shadows in her eyes.

"It worked, ma'am," he said. "The feud is finished an' peace has come to stay. Yore way with the Woodruffs will be easy from here out."

He turned swiftly away, not daring to trust himself to look at her. Like a blind man, he found his pony, rose to the saddle and reined up the dusty street. And then, suddenly, a rider was at his stirrup and Tess was grinning at him.

"Where you goin'?" he asked her.

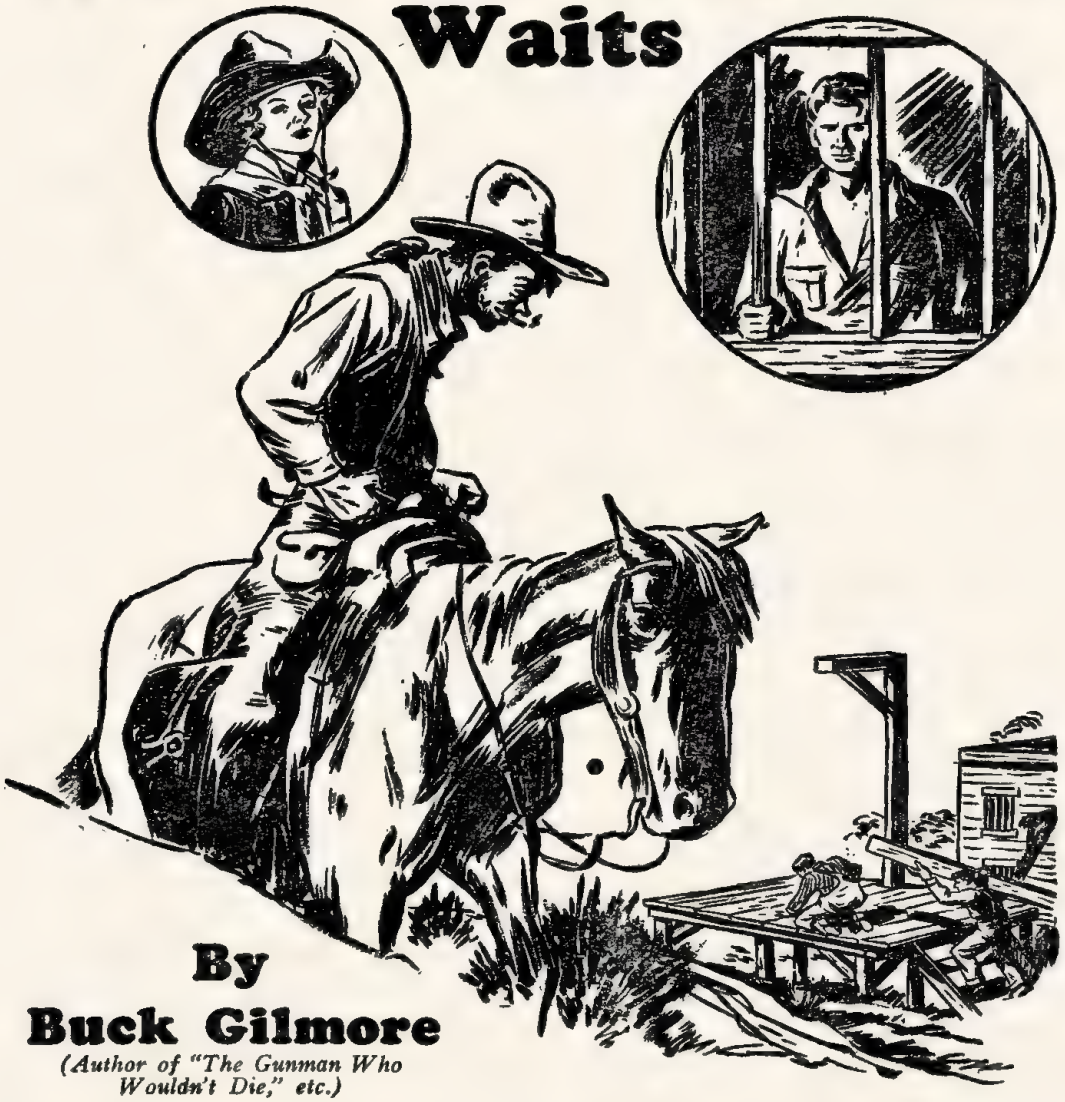
"I'm going to Montana," she told him, "with my husband. You see, I didn't make any promises."

Then they were riding back into town, and Old Rip was hollering at Steve from the step of his buggy. "Cripes," he cackled, "I thought you was drunk, mebby, ridin' out thataway. Or lost."

"For a minute," said Steve with great humility, "I thought I was lost. But what I wanted most in all this world found me."

THE END

# While the Hangnoose Waits



By

**Buck Gilmore**

*(Author of "The Gunman Who Wouldn't Die," etc.)*

**Pliny Cole demanded but two things of life—to bring a hangnoose to the man he hated above all others, and to win the heart of the wildling queen of that untamed range. He vowed to accomplish them both—though he had to condemn himself to hell to do it!**

PLINY COLE sat hunched in the saddle, astride his great-bodied black mare, his long face expressionless, watching the shadows roll down off the hills, and out across the flat-topped mesa. Pliny Cole liked to sit there, watching the shadows come down.

He could see the ranch house now where Betty Carlson lived. He liked to watch that house. And he liked to be alone, because he didn't want anybody to laugh at him; didn't want anybody to suspect that Pliny Cole, the hunch-back, was in love!

This feeling that Pliny Cole had for Betty Carlson terrified him and filled him with fear. He knew it was the strongest thing that had ever seized him; that it dominated him like the whipping wind dominated the clouds. That domination now was filling him with something that should not be in him—it was filling him with hate.

He hated his own brother. He hated Jim Cole because Jim Cole loved Betty too. And Pliny was afraid because he knew that Jim loved Betty, he was afraid she and his brother would be married. Then Pliny Cole didn't know what would happen. He was afraid, afraid now, of what he might do if that really did happen. Now while he sat there, Pliny wondered if his mind was twisted as his back was twisted. . . .

Why, he asked himself repeatedly, when he, a hunch-back, could not possibly have Betty, should he so resent his brother having her? But Pliny Cole knew it was no use to argue with himself. He knew that this thing within him was adamant, even as he, himself, had been adamant for all the past seven years when he'd worked like a Trojan, driving himself, driving the men who worked for him, till he was the biggest cattleman in the country.

He was wealthy now. His range was farther than he could ride from dawn till dusk. His men obeyed him. Anything he wished for was his. Anything—but Betty Carlson.

The shadows rolled across the mesa top. Pliny Cole turned his satin-coated mare, sent it galloping wildly back toward the ranch. He rode like a hunched-over devil while the wind whipped at him and howled like the tiny hate-driven forces within him. Finally he slowed down when he came to the ranch.

He went through the gate, stopped and sat up there on his black mare while he looked down at his brother, Jim Cole. Jim owned the ranch next to Pliny. Jim was making money too, but not as much as Pliny.

"Shall we throw in and make a big ranch?" Jim had asked Pliny after their father had died and had left them like amounts of money and range.

"We'll split," Pliny had said. "What I make I want to make by myself."

He'd wanted to show everybody that it didn't make any difference if he did have a hump on his back. He wanted to show that he was as good as any man alive. He'd build a ranch—a big one, bigger than any man's spread. . . .

"I just dropped in," Jim Cole smiled, in the living room of Pliny's ranch. "I just wanted to say hello, Pliny. I haven't seen you for a long time."

Pliny Cole nodded while he studied Jim's face. Pliny knew that Jim thought a lot of him. He had known it for many years. But that wasn't why Jim was here now. Pliny could tell. He knew that Jim Cole had something on his chest.

"I've been busy, Jim," he said. "Too busy to visit very much."

Jim nodded, then grinned anew. "And I've got some news," he said boyishly. "Some great news, Pliny! You'll be glad to hear it, I know."

Pliny Cole felt a great emptiness seize him. He knew, right then, what it was.

But he asked what it was, his long, pale face still expressionless.

"I'm going to be married next week," announced Jim, "to Betty Carlson. Ain't that swell, Pliny?"

Jim Cole stood there, grinning expectantly at Pliny. Then the grin gradually faded. Jim looked a little embarrassed, fidgeted a bit.

"I—I thought you'd be glad," he hesitated. "I—"

Pliny Cole nodded solemnly. "I am

glad," he said. "And I'm glad you came over. . . . Come over again, Jim."

Pliny Cole watched Jim Cole walk over to his bronc, mount, and ride away, vanish into the shadows that were gathering like a dark shroud of evil over the land.

"Glad!" said Pliny Cole bitterly. "God!"

LIKE an angry, ugly tide Pliny Cole felt the hate increase within him. It grew, and shook him; it made him sit on the long, spacious porch of the ranch house and brood, looking with clouded eyes out over the countless acres that were his. It was wicked and sinister and all-compelling.

Pliny Cole walked often to the long mirror in the hall of the house to peer at the reflection of himself, trying to see if his hate had marked him, to see if it showed in the lines of his face, or in his eyes. He'd walk back and forth in front of that mirror and look at the ugly hump that was up on his back. Then he'd stop and curse all men who were not deformed, all men straight of back. Three days passed. Pliny Cole was counting the days till Jim married Betty Carlson. He looked down below him now, out on his range, and saw his men and his cattle. Pliny Cole frowned, reined his black mare about and rode down the slope, to where some of his men were rebanking a tank, making a watering place for the cattle. Pliny looked around, saw some of Jim Cole's cattle there. "Chase Jim Cole's J-C's out of here," he found himself saying. "Get them all away. Then fence in this tank."

The men looked up, startled, as though they had not heard aright.

Pliny could feel their stares as he rode on, could almost hear their wondering words. They were his men, drawing his pay. They should take orders, nothing more. If Pliny Cole wanted to fence off a tank, that was his business.

He rode home and the shadows which rolled down off the hills again, seemed darkly sinister to Pliny Cole. He sat in the long, lonesome room in the ranch house and looked at the wall. He rose, went to the mirror, looked at the hump up between his shoulders. He whirled, picked up a stool, raised it up over his head and smashed it fiercely against the glass. Then he paced over to his chair, sank into it panting, glaring again at the wall.

A knock came to the door. Pliny wiped hate off of his face.

"Come in," he said.

The door opened and Peters, one of the men, one who had been out at the tank that afternoon, came in. He looked down at the shattered glass on the hall floor, stepped his highheeled boots over it, then stopped in front of Cole.

"There's gonna be a fight out at the tank," said Peters. "Jim Cole's men come along just after we got the wire up. They raised hell. They said, 'tear it down, or we'll tear it down for you'. So what will we do? You better come out and settle things."

"Don't you draw my wages," asked Pliny Cole. "Didn't I say to chase out the J-C's and to put up the fence?"

Peters looked at Pliny Cole as though he were trying to see something behind that granite face. Then he went to the door, put his big hat on his head.

"Okay," he sighed. It was as if he felt that it was a gent's own damn business if he wanted to fight his own brother. Then he went out.

Pliny Cole smiled. Maybe there would be a fight. Maybe Jim Cole would get hurt. Then maybe Pliny Cole could sit up on the mesa again and look at the thing he could never have. He could never have Betty, even if there was no Jim Cole. But he could look at her. . . .

Pliny Cole rose and paced back and forth across the long room for a while. Then he went out and saddled his horse and rode away into the night, off toward the water hole. The moon peeped down, sent down its silver rays in a soft light. It made the night ghostly.

Pliny stopped when he heard voices. He dismounted, crept forward, saw the two groups of men, his own men and Jim Cole's men, belligerent and threatening, with guns in their hands.

PLINY COLE stood there and waited, looking to see if Jim Cole was there among his men. Pliny couldn't see him. He led his mare around to one side, keeping in the shadows. Then the pound of hoofbeats sounded in the air.

Jim Cole came up, looked at the two groups, listened to what his men had to say. He raised his hand, then turned and waved his own men back.

"Go back to the ranch," he told them. "I'll settle this. I'll do it without fighting."

Pliny heard the hoof-beats of Jim Cole's horses fade into the night as his men went back.

"Did Pliny tell you to fence this tank, Jennings?" Jim asked Pliny's foreman. "Did he say to keep my cattle away from this water? Did he give those orders personally?"

"He sure did," said Jennings.

Jim Cole sighed. He looked as though he could hardly believe what he heard. "Okay, Jennings," he said after a while. "You forget all this, see? My men don't understand Pliny, that's all. They don't realize that—well, that he's got a reason, mebby, to act peculiar at times. Don't have any hard feelings about what my men did or said. My cattle will die, but I'd rather have 'em die than have trouble with Pliny. If he says fence the tank, then that settles it. Anything that Pliny wants is okay with me."

Pliny Cole stood there in the darkness and listened to Jim Cole ride away. He kept hearing him say that his men didn't realize that Pliny Cole had a reason to act peculiar. A reason—a hump on his back—that's what Jim Cole meant.

Pliny Cole looked over at his own men, as they left, then he smiled again. Jennings, his foreman, still waited. Pliny slowly took a longbarrelled gun from the holster at his hip. He climbed into his saddle, sighted the gun at Jennings, and pulled the trigger. After the echoes had died, after Jennings' body had slumped lifeless to the ground, Pliny went up to the fence, used the barrel of his gun to pry out some staples and let the wires down. Then he rode away again, Jennings still and motionless behind him.

PLINY raced across the dim-lit night. He saw no one behind him, and heard no pursuit as he raced to the ranch, slowed and rode quietly into the gate. He put up the mare and went into the house. He looked at the smashed mirror, then poured a big drink in a tumbler, and drank it in one huge gulp. He settled himself in a chair near a desk, took oil and rags from a drawer and cleaned his gun.

He finished and held out his hands to see if they trembled. They didn't. He went into another room and got a little mirror, looked at his own reflection.

He must be composed when his men came in. He must be natural; he must excite no suspicion. His men must think, as they naturally would think, that Jim Cole had fired that shot, that he had waited till Jennings had been left there at the tank alone, then killed him, and let down the wires. . . . .

Pliny waited. Yun See, his old Chink cook, padded noiselessly through the hallway. He stopped, looked at the

broken glass on the floor, looked over at the bottle of oil and the newly cleaned gun on the desk.

For an instant Pliny Cole was frozen, tormented by the question of whether Yun See knew that one important thing —that Pliny Cole had left the house this night. Did he know that Pliny had cleaned a gun?

Then Pliny heard his men coming back. A knock came to the door. Pliny said, "Come in."

Peters, the same one who had come before, stood there again, staring before he came on in. "I've got some awful news," he said after a while.

Pliny wondered if his own hands were shaking, then knew they were not. He was cold, sure of himself, but he didn't speak.

"Jennings is dead!" said Peters. "and Jim Cole killed him!"

Pliny Cole tried to look shocked. He rose and paced across the room.

"We argued out there," Peters explained, "like I told you. Then Jim Cole come. He sent his men away, and stayed there himself. He said it was okay with him if you wanted to fence the tank. He talked smooth as hell, then went away. We come away, too, left Jennings there to watch the fence a while. Then we heard a shot. We come back a-runnin', and there was Jennings, dead, layin' beside a cut fence."

"And what makes you say Jim Cole shot him?" asked Pliny Cole.

"Who else was out there to shoot him?" asked Peters. "Who else would want to shoot him? And who else would want to cut the fence?"

"There's one way to be sure," Pliny Cole said. "If Jim did it, Jennings was shot with a .41. Jim has a .41, and so do I. Those two are the only guns of that caliber in the country. Our father gave us each one before he died. If Jennings has that kind of a bullet in him . . . ." Pliny Cole let his shoulders slump, let a dejected, hopeless cast come over his face. "Then—then I won't know what to say," he finished wearily.

"I'll know what to say!" said Peters. "And I know what a jury will say!"

Pliny Cole smiled again as Peters went out. Jennings would have a .41 in him, Pliny Cole was sure of that!

PLINY COLE sat there in his living room and listened to the sounds that came from outside the door. Just by listening he could tell what was happening. He knew when they took Jennings away. He waited three hours. Then he knew that they came back, and what they had discovered. He knew that the doctor had taken a .41 slug out of Jennings' dead body. Then he softly went outside. He heard the mutter of the men's voices, out at the bunk-house. Ominous muttering . . . .

Pliny Cole sat in the big chair in his living room all night, staring with his bright black eyes at the wall, seeing the thing he had done; seeing Jennings dead, Jim Cole behind bars, and Jim Cole's neck in the noose, or sent to jail for life. He saw himself, up atop a mesa, watching Betty Carlson. Then—finally he saw Yun See, the old Chink, stopping, looking at the bottle of oil—

Pliny Cole didn't go to town to see Jim Cole in jail. He knew he'd show his hate for him if he did that, and the thought terrified him, just as he was terrified up atop the mesa, thinking of Betty Carlson.

The day Jim Cole's trial came up, Pliny went to court. He had to stand up and swear that Peters had come in and told him there was going to be trouble, that he better come out and settle it.

"And you didn't go out?" asked the prosecutor. "And why not?"

"I didn't think it was necessary," said

Pliny Cole. "I didn't think there could be a fight."

They put Jim Cole on the stand and he swore that he'd gone straight home. They showed him his gun, asked him why he'd killed Jennings with it.

"I didn't kill him," said Jim Cole simply.

The prosecuting attorney looked at the jury, smiled as he shrugged, as though to ask, "Now what can you do with a man like that?"

Pliny Cole sat there and stared at his brother, the brother he hated—the brother who had been about to take Betty Carlson away from him.

Jim Cole's face was pale, but he held his head up. He found Pliny's eyes and held them with his own. He looked long and steadily at Pliny, longer and more steadily then he had ever looked before.

"A .41 caliber gun killed Jennings," the prosecutor was saying. "There are only two guns of that caliber in this county. One belongs to the accused. He was the only one with that caliber gun, there where the murder occurred. Gentlemen . . . ."

Pliny Cole stared back at Jim Cole, watched the soft, pitying, understanding smile that touched Jim's lips as he looked at Pliny's haggard face. And all of a sudden a thought hit Pliny Cole hard and drove the blood from his face. Two guns—his gun, and Jim's gun! Jim Cole must know that Pliny Cole had murdered Jennings!

Only two guns! And Jim was smiling as though that was okay with him, as though he was sorry for Pliny . . . .

Pliny Cole rose suddenly and went outside. He saw the looks that people directed at him. They felt sorry for him. They pitied him. They pitied him because his brother was a murderer.

Outside, Pliny stood at the hitch-rack, beside his mare, an over-short, hunched figure, his jet-black eyes staring out of his pale, too-long face, as he watched the court-house door. He heard the stomp and shuffle of many feet. The jury was going out. He waited, unmoving, seeing Jim Cole in his mind's eye, as Jim smiled, knowing that Pliny had killed Jennings.

"He knows," Pliny seemed to hear a ghostly voice whisper in his ears, "He knows. He knows *he* didn't do it—so he knows you did!"

The jury came back again and Pliny heard the drone of another voice. Then the feet stomped and people started to come out the door. Their faces were set tight and grim, and Pliny knew the verdict.

He watched Betty Carlson come out, walking beside her uncle, Bill Carlson, her face white, her eyes staring. She stopped in front of Pliny, looked at him with eyes that registered so much misery that it shocked Pliny Cole. Those miserable, haunted eyes seemed to burn clear through him.

"They're going to—going to—"

Betty Carlson couldn't finish it. She buried her face in her hands, went away again beside her uncle. She was sobbing, as she got into the buckboard seat and was driven out of town . . . .

PLINY COLE stood there and watched the buckboard vanish out of town. Then he looked at the iron-barred windows in the building behind the court-house, the jail where they had taken Jim Cole.

"Jim knows," Pliny Cole heard that voice with him. "He knows you did it, because you are the only one who could have done it."

That thought shook Pliny Cole, but not so much as it had. Now he reasoned that even if Jim Cole did know, it would do him no good. Jim might talk all he wished but no one would pay any attention to him. Everybody knew that Pliny

Cole had a .41. They had known it there at the trial. But they thought that Pliny Cole had been at the house when Jennings had been killed. Peters, Pliny's segundo, had said he had come to get Pliny and that Pliny wouldn't go out to the tank. Then Pliny had been at the house when the men came back.

Jim Cole might know in his own mind that Pliny had killed Jennings, but Jim Cole would be the only one who would know it.

Pliny went to his black mare, mounted and rode away. He went up to the mesa top again, watched the cabin where Betty Carlson lived. He waited there till the shadows rolled down off the hills then rode back to the ranch. But somehow, now, his satisfaction was not as great as it should have been. Somehow, now, he kept remembering the look that Yun See had given him, looking at the oil bottle on the desk, at the smashed mirror.

He kept wondering if Yun See knew that he had ridden away that night, that he had come back and cleaned a gun.

In the darkness, Pliny Cole entered the ranch yard again, let his mare into the corral and went into the house, a big, still, empty house, somehow eerie now.

The lamps threw flickering shadows when he lit them. The sound of Yun See's sandals, slithering across the floor in the back of the house, seemed to be sinister, foreboding sounds.

Pliny Cole got the little mirror again, sat down near the lighted lamp and looked at his reflection again. Was his face changing? Did those dark lines, black against the pale skin of his face, show deeper and darker now than they had before? Was that hate marking him? Did he look like a murderer?

Pliny Cole looked up quickly and saw Yun See standing there in a semi-dark doorway, looking at him steadfastly, regarding him with his black, expressionless eyes. Pliny put the mirror down quickly, slid it in under him as he sat there.

"Get out of here, Yun See," he said harshly.

"Yes," said the aged Chinaman.

The night wore on and Pliny Cole did not sleep. He kept worrying about Yun See, about the lines in his face. He kept hearing a subtle, inner voice talking to him, telling him things he already knew, but things that he was powerless to fight against.

"Your mind is as crooked as your back," he heard that inner voice whisper. "You're a murderer, twice over—Jennings and Jim Cole. Nobody else will know, but you'll know . That's why you can't sleep now."

"That's a lie," Pliny Cole told himself. "I don't care for Jim Cole. I'm hard. I had to be hard to do the things I did, to build a bigger ranch, to make more money than any one else in the country. I can't sleep because I'm wondering about Yun See. I'll keep on wondering till I know all about it. Finally I'll know whether Yun See knows anything or not. Then I'll do something about it."

But Pliny Cole didn't do anything about it. He watched Yun See closely, knew that the old Chink was watching him too, that he would stop and peer at him while Pliny would be sitting looking into a mirror. There was no more expression there in that Oriental's eyes or face than there was in Pliny Cole's.

Pliny Cole rode out to the mesa every day. He sat and watched Betty Carlson, and he knew he'd be able to watch her always. He smiled that wise and wicked smile. Then he'd ride to the edge of town, sit up atop the hill, and watch them building the scaffold down there, getting ready to hang Jim Cole. . . .

Every day Pliny rode out, first to the mesa top, then to the hill to watch the

new wooden pieces go up on the scaffold. Then he returned to the ranch to watch Yun See.

FOUR days more and Jim Cole would hang. Only four days to worry about what Yun See knew. If the Chinaman said nothing by that time . . .

Yun See was in the hallway now as Pliny came into the house. He looked at Pliny with that steady, calculating stare that was so new to Yun See and so disconcerting to Pliny Cole.

"I think Yun See go to town tonight," the Chink said, part questioningly, part assertingly.

Pliny Cole stopped, looked at Yun See. So Yun See wanted to go to town? To talk to the Law, perhaps? Pliny's face didn't change expression.

"No," he said positively. "You stay here, Yun See." He took two steps nearer to the Chink, looked steadily into Yun See's eyes. "Don't go near town! Don't leave the house! Sabe that, Yun See?"

The Chinaman blinked his slant eyes, stared hard at Pliny. Finally he nodded. "Yess," he said sibilantly. "I sabe."

He shuffled away, and Pliny Cole watched him. So Yun See wanted to go to town? Pliny Cole smiled. Perhaps it would be better if Pliny would kill the Chinaman, too. Maybe it would be better if Yun See *couldn't* talk. But how could he do it? Killing Yun See would not be as safe as killing Jennings. . . .

Pliny waited. He stayed at home, watching Yun See like a hawk. He paced the floor at night, peering into the Chink's room to make sure he was there. Two days, and two nights, went past. The third day dawned. Tomorrow they would hang Jim Cole. Tomorrow everything would be over. Tomorrow—

Now the minutes were hours. Pliny Cole wondered if the scaffold was finished, if they had the rope on it, hanging down with its ready noose. That noose seemed to call Pliny Cole. He kept wondering about it.

He kept wanting to see it, to inspect the new timber, to see the rope. He listened and heard Yun See shuffling about inside his room. Yun See could not possibly get away the next hour—just long enough for Pliny to ride to the mesa, then over to the edge of town. . . .

Pliny hurried out, saddled his black and rode away like the wind. He skirted the mesa top and looked down at Betty Carlson's cabin. He raced toward town, sat for a moment up atop the hill and looked at the scaffold there. Then Pliny Cole raced back to the ranch again.

He went inside, looked for Yun See. He went to the kitchen, to the Chinaman's room. He looked all about the house. Yun See was gone!

A terrible fear clutched at Pliny Cole. Yun See had sneaked away. He'd been watching Pliny. He'd seen his chance; he'd gone to town, to tell!

Pliny Cole thought of running. Or should he stay? Torn with doubt, with fear, Pliny went to the porch and sat in the hide-bottomed chair there. He watched the riders come in from the range, go into the bunkhouse. Pretty soon they would come out for supper. But there'd be no supper. Yun See was gone.

Every time he thought of that Pliny Cole wanted to run. Then he'd tell himself that he wasn't sure. He'd wait. So he sat there like a statue in his chair, then stiffened. He watched a rider come toward the house, a rider with a badge glittering on his vest.

It was too late to run now.

Yun See had gone; now the sheriff was coming. The scaffold was ready—ready to hang Jennings' murderer, but it wouldn't hang Pliny Cole. . . . Pliny let his long-fingered hand drop to the

gun at his hip, the gun that had killed Jennings.

The sheriff rode into the yard, came up to the house, and sat there on his horse.

"Your Chink came through town just a little while ago, Pliny," he said. "He stopped and told me—"

From the very instant the sheriff started talking Pliny Cole's brain started to click. Yun See had gone through town. He had stopped. He had told.

Pliny Cole leaped from his chair. His hand whipped the gun from its holster, pointed it at the sheriff. A spidery figure, he stood there, trembling, his eyes blazing.

"He stopped, did he?" he snarled. "He stopped and told you, and you came right out! All right. I went out, like the Chink said, and shot Jennings with my .41. Then I hurried home and was here when the men came back. Yun See was the only one who could know. I wasn't sure or I'd have killed him, too!"

Stunned, standing there frozen, the sheriff was motionless. Pliny Cole cursed. His finger tightened on the trigger. His gun boomed as the sheriff awoke, threw himself sidewise.

The sheriff's gun cracked from beside his horse. Afoot, hunched beside his mount, the sheriff stood there and watched Pliny Cole wilt down on to the porch floor. Carefully, watching the dying man, the sheriff went forward, looked down at Pliny, dying fast, but with hate contorting his face.

"What I was gonna tell you, Pliny," the sheriff said as he stood there, "was that Yun See come past and left a letter for you. Jim Cole give me one too, and since I was comin' out here anyway, I brought the Chink's with me."

The sheriff pulled a letter from his pocket, tore it open and read it aloud:

> Most Honorable Master:
>
> Grief fills my heart that I must leave you, who have been so kind to me. For many days I have asked for the courage to speak and tell you that I must go, but always my heart would fail me. But alas, the time has come when your servant must return to his native land. May your feet always walk upon the golden path of riches, and your mind always dwell in the blessed sunshine of happiness.
>
> Yun See.

The sheriff took the other note from his pocket, the one Jim Cole had sent to Pliny. He held it up before Pliny's fast glazing eyes.

"Shall I read it to you?" he asked.

Pliny Cole made a hate-twisted grimace again. Another letter. One from Jim, threatening him probably, saying that Jim Cole would talk unless . . .

"Burn it," whispered Pliny Cole.

He watched while the flames ate the paper, while the sheriff dropped it from his fingers, to lie on the porch floor just a little way from Pliny Cole's face. And the last words of it were readable as the paper flared open, as the flames died:

> . . . . it's okay with me, Pliny. Anything you do is okay with me. If—

Then the suffering, bitter soul of Pliny Cole slid through the gate of Eternity, as he knew, so bitterly that his own hate and his own fear had damned him. . . . That Yun See knew nothing, that Jim Cole would have died wordlessly.

Slowly, the sheriff mounted, turned his bronc toward town. There was a man to free, a scaffold to tear down. . . .

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***Next Month:***

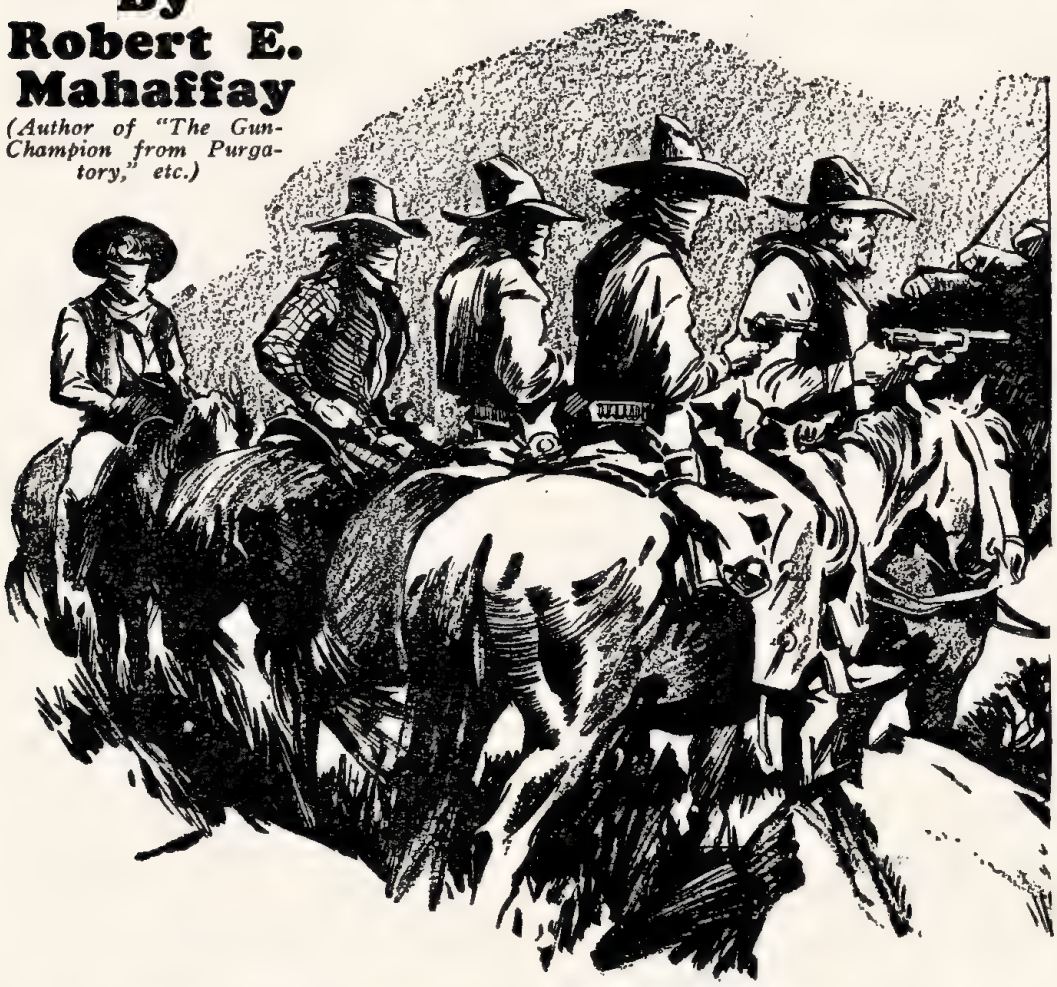
**STONE CODY'S "STAMPEDE OF OUTCAST MEN"**

***A novel of a lost-cause call to sixgun battle***

# Lawin' Is Plain Hell!

**By Robert E. Mahaffay**

*(Author of "The Gun-Champion from Purgatory," etc.)*



**Alone, Wick Billings faced that deadly bushwhack range, his only armor the badge of a murdered lawman and the iron courage of his frontier blood. Yet could all his rawhide heritage count against the blood-cry of a howling hang-tree mob—and face the hate of the girl he had sworn to protect?**

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Into the West had poured a motley riffraff. The hell-froth which had trailed in, in the wake of the railroad, was still there. Outlaws from up along the Missouri and from down Texas way had drifted in, too, seeking easy profits from stolen herds. And disgruntled fighters

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* * *

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It seemed to Wick Billings that the man had been repeating those same words for hours, hopefully, enticingly. Wick Billings didn't give a damn. He was gripping the bars at the front of the cell tightly with both hands. They were new steel bars. Symbols of a new law.

Peering through the dusky haze of the corridor, Wick Billings said harshly, "How much longer before they hang me?"

Someone down the corridor yelled, "You got twenty-five minutes yet, Billings. Hang tough, kid."

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steps to the gallows without tripping. And he wouldn't twist away from the knotted hang-rope as if it were burning him. Any last words? Hell, no. A man sounded like a snivelling fool blurting out that he was innocent. Screaming it, sometimes. No last words. Damn a life that turned out this way!

An opened door let light into the dim corridor, and down it boot echoes now rolled. There were voices, and a man cried excitedly, "By God, the Big Gun's sprung him!"

The blue-jowled warden came up to the cell and stared straight into the eyes of Wick Billings. He turned the key in the lock. He stated grimly, "You've been pardoned, Billings. The Governor's here. He's waiting to see you. Come along."

Wick Billings laughed. He didn't believe it. It was a trick to get him out quietly, so he wouldn't kick up a row and turn the other prisoners into yelling demons. The priest was muttering some prayer fervently. Wick Billings shrugged and fell into step behind the warden.

A big man in a gray suit was standing by the desk in the warden's office, and Billings noted his cropped, straight white hair as soon as he came in. He saw, later, his thick brows, and the strong, honest mouth beneath his tobacco-stained mustache.

Governor Rand Gorst came forward, held out his hand. He said heartily, "I'm mighty glad to be able to do this, Billings."

Only then did Wick Billings understand that this thing was true, and now the terrific, wrenching emotions he had been fighting to suppress flooded through him with tremendous power. For the life he had cursed a few moments before was a thing he had always wanted desperately. He wanted to shout, laugh, anything to relieve the twisting turmoil within him. But the words stopped as if there were a fist in his throat.

Seeing that, the Governor stepped back, motioned with a pudgy hand toward the desk. "Would you swear," he asked, "that one of those knives was yours and the other wasn't?"

On a clean white sheet of paper lay two hunting knives, needle-pointed and razor-sharp for skinning. Their hafts were of carved cedar, secured with hand-hammered brass rivets, and burned into the wood of each were the initials W. B. But the steel blade of one was dark with dried blood.

Wick Billings, the jury had decided, had plunged that knife into the throat of one Jed Carr in the mistaken belief that he was avenging the murder of his father.

Wick Billings weighed them both. "I couldn't," he said at last. "Whoever matched them made a good job of it. Mine was stolen; I told the jury that. But why two of them now? Do you figure the man who stole mine lost it again, and had to duplicate it? If that happened, how did you get hold of the second one?"

"It was sent to me yesterday, anonymously." There was a queer look on the Governor's face. "I had decided, however, to grant the pardon before it came."

"Why?" Wick Billings straightened slowly to his inch-under-six-feet of range-toughened sinews and flat, hard muscles. There was a driving quality in the glance of his sharp, gray eyes.

"Because I had a job for you." The Governor spread his feet a little, and drew a long breath. "I knew your dad down in Texas; I knew he wasn't a knife fighter. I'd heard something about you. And I had a job that I thought a man on his way to the gallows might take!"

Wick Billings laughed grimly. "There's nothing like a hang-rope around his neck to put guts into a man. What's the job?"

"Taking the law," said the Governor slowly, "into the Two Rivers country."

THE face of Wick Billings turned abruptly hard and bitter. "They framed me there," he said harshly. "They killed my father. An' I reckon by this time they've robbed me of everything I ever had. I'm goin' back, but not with a law badge to hide behind."

"Wrong, Billings. It's a bigger thing than that."

"Not to me."

Anger flamed into the Governor's red-veined cheeks. "It would have been to Joshua Billings! I wish to God I had him instead of his gutless whelp! You'll sneak back there with your gun oiled for one man or maybe two. You haven't got the cold guts it would take to tackle the whole dirty setup! One man didn't kill Josh. A period did it. A period that'll turn this country into black hell if it's not ended!"

His face rage-whitened, Wick Billings took a step toward the Governor, stopped. Joshua Billings had told him the same things, many times. That was why old Joshua had fought so hard for the organization of the Territory—so that honest law might be brought into it. It was the renegade dominance he had struggled against which had killed Joshua Billings.

The Governor turned abruptly away, came striding back. When he spoke again he spoke as Rand Gorst, cattleman, who had fought in the battle of San Jacinto for Texan independence.

"It's a question of whether I'm to run this Territory or whether a pack of renegades will," he said quietly. "Your father and I both came out of Texas knowing this would sometime be a great country. Up till three years ago there was no law here but vigilante law—and half the vigilantes were blacklegs. I've lost two men already trying to wipe out the last of them in Two Rivers. The cards have been dealt, son. They go, or I go. And if the crooks and tinhorns and murderers can whip me, they'll give this country a beating it may never recover from.

"Make no mistake. That's what they're after, and they've organized to do it. They're on top of me from all directions; I'm being undermined even back in Washington. Out here I've got two things to cope with—the settlers coming in and the reservation Indians who have got to be taken care of. There's a contract beef herd of five thousand longhorns due within two weeks from the Brazos valley. For the Indians. Josh had the beef contract before he died, so I reckon you know how important that angle is."

Wick Billings nodded slowly. Besides being the chief executive of the Territory, the Governor was superintendent of Indian affairs. There was no surer way of striking at him. An Indian outbreak, brought on by starvation and bad treatment, would cost him his office.

Rand Gorst, cattleman, said, "Thirty years ago I could have done the job myself. Now, I need a fighter, and a man who figures that the needs of forty thousand people are greater than his own. Maybe I was wrong when I thought that the son of Josh Billings was the man I wanted."

Wick Billings stared straight at him. The bleak fury gripping his mind had made him forget what his father had stood for. The lawlessness which had resulted in Josh Billings' death was the thing to be fought, not the man who had triggered the bullet. Success in this would build a monument to the name of a pioneer treacherously murdered.

"You picked your man," said Wick Billings. "When do I start?" ....

UNDER a boiling, late-summer sun Wick Billings rode for the brawling, blood-hungry frontier town of Two Rivers.

In a leather-wrapped parcel behind his saddle he carried the two knives—one his own, the other fashioned to frame him by an unknown hand and then sent to free

him by a person likewise unknown. He carried, too, a letter of introduction to Ben Patchett, Indian agent in Two Rivers.

Wick Billings knew what he was heading into. Two Rivers was snarling at Territorial law like a lobo backed into a hole. Already two of the Governor's appointees had died there.

After three days of riding he took time out to swing to the eastward, hoping he would not find what he knew he must. There was nothing left of what had been the Billings ranch but a burned smear on the prairie. The cattle, he had known for sure, would be gone.

He rode on slowly and a little grimly after that. He wondered if Rip Tolley also was gone. Tolley had come up the trail with Josh Billings.

On the day following, the sun was slanting into Wick's eyes as he spurred his weary gray gelding down the roaring main street of Two Rivers. A big, white-topped Conestoga wagon loomed through a smother of tawny dust. Wick Billings pulled out to let it by.

The walks were jammed with a jostling flow of men—miners, for the most part, gamblers, laborers, teamsters, and an occasional shopkeeper; here and there a spash of color indicated feminine apparel. From the open fronts of saloons, honka-tonks and gambling layouts issued waves of hoarse sound that beat steadily against the eardrums.

Two shots snarled crisply and suddenly in the hot air. Eyes narrowing, Wick Billings urged the gray gently forward. The walks, he observed from the corner of his eye, were clearing rapidly. So was the street. A quick premonition that his coming had been reported ran through Billings. He let his right fist ride at a holster top, and peered through the dust haze.

Bogged down in the dusty ruts directly ahead of him was a string of three high freight wagons. The driver was flogging his mules desperately. Billings caught a wickedly gleaming stab from the man's eyes as he went by.

Pulling abreast of the hind wagon, Billings strained to see through the dust which hung like a shimmering curtain.

Fifty paces beyond him, against the flimsy boards of a store front, crouched a scrawny figure of a man, both hands gun-filled. The whip-like curve of the man's torso, the set of the hatless head on thin shoulders, told Wick Billings that he had found Rip Tolley!

The street had become very quiet. Across it, from the rigid Tolley, stood a shaggy-headed miner with a rifle in the crook of his elbow. Between Billings and Tolley were planted two others, short guns half drawn from leather . . . .

## CHAPTER TWO

### Sixgun Inoculation

FOR a split second the scene was a vicious, deadly tableau. Then Rip Tolley's head came around slowly. A stringy, tan beard covered his face to the eyes. His voice cracked out sharply: "It's you they want, Wick. Behind you!"

A shot roared before the words were fully out. The rifleman posted across the street had dropped the muzzle of his weapon, fired from the hip. Rip Tolley's lean frame jerked; whether it was from the impact of lead or the recoil of the two shots he blasted in return, Billings could not tell.

Billings saw the rifleman drop to his knees, and Billings, himself, whirled savagely in the saddle. There was a blur of movement behind him.

The freighter had vaulted from the back of the near wheeler to the top of his load on the first wagon. He scrambled for footing there, tilting up a sixgun. Flame splashed from the muzzle, and the ex-

plosion added to the hammering echoes in the street. The lead ripped into the cantle of Billings' saddle.

Mindful of the two gunmen still between him and Tolley, Wick Billings rolled out of the saddle into the street, and more of the teamster's lead kicked up dust into his face as he flattened on his belly. Wick lifted his Colts, snapped two fast shots. The teamster staggered, pitched down off the wagon.

Billings rolled under the wheels of the rear wagon, squirming about. The rifleman, he saw, was now on his hands and knees, blood running from his mouth. Gun explosions were still crashing madly. Back braced against the wall, Rip Tolley was still shooting with his left hand gun. His right arm dangled helplessly. He rolled, as if to push away from the wall, and couldn't make it.

Cursing, Wick Billings threw lead at the two gunmen between him and Tolley. A choking scream burst from the throat of one, and he went down. Sudden fear struck across the face of the other, and as a slug picked at his shirt front, he twisted and darted into the protection of a gap between two buildings.

Billings climbed to his feet, ran toward Rip Tolley. Strength had left the old man's body and he had slid down to a sitting position, his head swaying at a crazy angle.

Men were pouring out into the street again, but Wick Billings did not see them. He knelt by the side of his father's old friend, an arm supporting the thin back. One of Rip Tolley's cheekbones had been shot away, and Billings saw that the front of his shirt was soggy.

"It's me, Rip," he cried. "Wick Billings. You can hear me can't you, Rip? Who were they? Who set 'em on you?"

Tolley spoke with strained effort. "They was layin' for you, kid . . . . Heard you'd got out . . . . Patchett rigged the deal."

"Ben Patchett—the agent?" said Wick.

"That's him, kid. He's runnin' things here now. Tough—I can't be here to help yuh . . . ."

An internal hemorrhage choked off his breath. The old man died in Wick Billings' arms.

His eyes bleak and terrible, Wick Billings looked down the street. Four men were dead already. And one of them, Rip Tolley, had died to save Wick Billings' life.

IT WAS that relic of more lawless days, the vigilantes, who had captured Wick Billings after Jed Carr had died with a knife in his throat. Captured was not correctly the word. They had ridden out to the Billings ranch house and picked him up.

Honest Cart LeDoux had ridden with them. Like old Joshua Billings, LeDoux was a Texan; and like him, he had fought sternly for law and order. When there was no other agency for enforcing the law other than the vigilante groups, LeDoux had backed them. A hard, bloody business, he had said, but a necessary one.

The vigilantes had wanted to hang Wick Billings. LeDoux had stood out against them. Not for Wick's sake, or his father's memory, but that the law might be given its chance. Territorial law had come to the Two Rivers country; the dirty work of killing was its job.

Alone in the dusk-dimmed street of Two Rivers, Wick Billings let his mind run back to the stark happenings of almost a year ago. Wick's father, one of the first men in the country, had had the contract to supply beef for the reservation Indians. A tough proposition, that contract, but one which paid well. Coming up the trail with a herd, that fall, Joshua Billings had died with a bushwhacker's slug in his back.

Two weeks later, Jed Carr, pseudo-gunman and saloon hanger-on, had in-

timated that he could, if paid enough, reveal the murderer. When Wick Billings had faced Carr, grimly, in a back room of the Longhorn Saloon, a knife had come hurtling through the open window from the dark of the alley. Blood from Carr's spitted jugular had splashed over Wick Billings' shirt front. Afterwards, two men were found—or bought—who swore that he had worn the knife to the meeting.

Wick Billings had expected to take over the beef contract. His trial and conviction prevented that. The contract had gone to Cart LeDoux . . . .

The undertaker accepted Rip Tolley's body with callous unconcern when Billings brought it in. "Can't make him look right, no matter what I do now," he advised over and around his cud of tobacco. Wick Billings had sworn at him bitterly.

With the night cloaking him, Billings made his way along the crowded street. Ben Patchett, he had learned from the undertaker, could be found at the Longhorn. He owned it, along with half a dozen other rough-and-tumble joints in Two Rivers.

Wick Billings got no greetings when he entered the Longhorn, though there were many men he had known here. Eyes examined him sidelong, never directly. Anger grew in him slowly; he could not help seeing that he was violently hated by some of these men, as violently scorned by others.

That turmoil was in his mind when he heard a voice say, "Wick!"

Billings turned sharply, an emotion he could not control leaping in his veins. Clear and distinct in the crowd behind him he saw the face which had been a torturing vision during those months in prison.

Marlene LeDoux's blue eyes had always had a quality which disturbed Wick deeply. Yellow window light was slicing into them now; it made them sparkle, though it took the rich color out of her cheeks. With the shadow of the noose over him, Wick Billings had tried to wrench out of his mind his love for her. He had failed in that. The shock of her nearness was proof enough. Yet, during those months in prison he had had no word from her—no visit, no letter, nothing.

He forced a way for her until they were out of the swirl of the crowd. He said, "How are you, Marlene?" and swore under his breath for saying it.

In a voice that was low and not steady Marlene LeDoux said, "We—heard you were coming back, Wick. I can't tell you how glad—"

There was a pain Wick Billings could not understand etched about her eyes. He had an impression she wanted to say more, and couldn't.

FOR the first time Wick Billings saw that Marlene's brother was with her. He had never liked Breck LeDoux—a lanky, shiftless man of thirty or thereabouts with a pasty face, the complexion of which the sun did not alter. Breck had a passion for gambling and was uncommonly skillful with his hands in the manipulation of cards. Worthless, and under certain circumstances dangerous, Wick had summed him up.

Wick nodded to Breck and turned back to Marlene. "A lawman coming here hasn't much to be glad about," he told her deliberately. He recognized that his impulse was to hurt her, and he hated himself for surrendering to it.

Her eyes, with that hurt deep in them, were fixed on him searchingly, probing for the meaning beneath his words. She found the barbed shaft he had intended, apparently, for she answered in so low a tone he barely heard it: "I'm sorry you think that, Wick."

Breck LeDoux broke in gruffly. "Come along, Marlene. We're late now."

A last straight look from the girl brought a flush to Wick Billings' cheeks. Then she was part of the blur of moving figures in the street. . . . .

Wick Billings stared after her. She believed, he thought, that he was a murderer. She had forgotten him—forgotten the moments of love they had shared together. Had she believed in him, had she really loved him. . . .

Wick Billings swore. He was aware that with his blunt rudeness he had hurt himself more than he could possibly have hurt her. He loved Marlene LeDoux with a fierceness that consumed him. He always would. Bitterly he sought the jostling contact of the crowd, making for the Longhorn Saloon and Ben Patchett.

In his office at the rear of the Longhorn, Ben Patchett settled his bulk in one chair and spun a second chair, with his foot, toward Wick Billings. He talked from deep in his throat, rarely moving his thick lips.

"So Two Rivers gets a new sheriff? The two ahead of you ran into hard luck."

Wick Billings shrugged. "Hard luck is catching. A gent who makes a habit of passin' it out is likely to wind up with a case of it himself."

"Not with proper inoculation, Billings. Sixgun inoculation. That was a pretty fight you put up this afternoon. A better fight than I thought you could put up. I should have remembered how well you shoot. But had there been eight men instead of four . . . ." Ben Patchett spread his pulpy hands. "The inoculation, in your particular case, was insufficient."

Wick Billings stared at this man who was coolly admitting that he had arranged the attempted killing.

Ben Patchett stared back, unruffled. He gave the impression of being exceptionally strong without having the weight to go with the strength. His forehead, cheeks and jaws were blocky, powerful. The glance from his black eyes, which were like polished metal and set very close together, was like the thrust of an Indian war spear.

"Gorst couldn't tell me just who I'd be buckin'," stated Wick Billings. "I'm glad to find out."

"A good man, Gorst," Patchett nodded, "but weak. He won't last." Patchett leaned forward suddenly and his voice gathered force. "There'll be a new Governor of this Territory within the year. Why not play along, Billings?"

"I'm already drawin' wages."

With a harsh expelling of his breath Patchett said, "Ben Patchett—will be Governor!"

## CHAPTER THREE

### Damned for a Killer

THE reigning impulse in this powerful man, Billings recognized then, was not so much greed as ambition. And he was willing to wreck a Territory to gratify that craving. Patchett would smash Gorst, as he perhaps had smashed lesser individuals, to get him out of the way.

"Make a move," Billings flung at him grimly, "that's outside the law, an' you'll get the law rammed down your throat."

"Like Jed Carr did?" exclaimed Patchett instantly. "You almost hung for that killing. And you and I both know that you didn't do it. But nobody else does—with one exception. Maybe you'd like to have me produce the proof that Breck LeDoux murdered Carr?"

Wick Billings stiffened. "Breck LeDoux? That's a lie!"

"Think so? Say the word and I'll turn the proof over to you—publicly. So you can't wiggle out of passing him on to the gallows!" Ben Patchett leaned back, his close-set eyes lashing against the lawman's taut and bloodless face. "I thought as much. Love her, don't you? Get her

brother hung for her and she'll hate you. Well, do you want it, or don't you?"

Wick Billings was staring at Patchett, but he did not see him. If Wick took the proof, his own name would be cleared. He would prove to Marlene LeDoux that he was innocent, only to have her turn unalterably against him. And Ben Patchett would, of course, demand a price.

"Take your proof to hell with you!" Wick Billings muttered between his teeth. "If it's there to be had, I'll find it myself when I want it."

Ben Patchett half rose, snarling. "All right, Billings. It's your move. Jump the wrong way in this and I'll turn Breck LeDoux over to the law. That's all. Take your time thinking it over."

Wick Billings said, "You've already had my answer," and turned out of the room. He rented a room in one of the hotels and without undressing lay on the cot, smoking.

With a bitter certainty he knew that eventually, as a lawman, he must expose Breck LeDoux—with no regard for what it would do to Marlene. He himself, had no proof now of Breck's guilt; nor would he accept proof of it from Patchett. But before his stay here was ended, the stark facts must come out. And he had no doubt at all but that Breck LeDoux was the man.

A thought struck Billings suddenly. Ben Patchett had been bluffing when he threatened to turn Breck LeDoux over to the law. Breck LeDoux knew too much to be gotten rid of in that way. The logical conclusion followed instantly. Breck LeDoux was in imminent danger of his life! He was a weakling; he had been used; he would be discarded at the first opportunity!

Wick Billings swung his feet down from the cot. Prison would be the safest place for LeDoux, but as yet he had no evidence on which to put him there. The most he could do at the moment was warn him. There was a certain hard irony in that, Billings reflected grimly. He would be saving Breck LeDoux's life, only to take it later . . . .

IT WAS past eight when Wick Billings headed the gray out of Two Rivers at a lope. Two hours later he rode into the ranch yard of Carter LeDoux's Bar T.

The ruby glow of a cigarette was moving on the wide porch. Billings stopped, called softly, "Hello, the house."

The movement of the cigarette ceased. A voice that wavered uncertainly replied, "Who is it?"

Billings called his name, and moved closer. He recognized then the slight frame of Breck LeDoux, and saw that Breck was slipping a pistol back into the pocket of his coat.

Breck advised surlily, "You ain't wanted here."

"Maybe not, Breck. I came anyhow. Just had a talk with Patchett, and I've got a chunk of advice for you. Don't let one of Patchett's gun-hands get behind you. Understand me?"

"No, I don't," Breck cried angrily. "What's your game—tryin' to hook me up with Ben Patchett? Damn your crooked—"

He broke off short as the door of the house behind him swung open. The massive frame of Carter LeDoux loomed in the flood of light. Shadowed by his shaggy head and broad shoulders, his full gray beard looked black. Just behind him stood Marlene.

"Billings?" demanded LeDoux, an angry growl in his voice.

Wick Billings nodded. "Howdy, LeDoux. Happened to be swingin' by an' I stopped to tell Breck here that if you need any help bringin' that contract stuff over the—"

"I may need help," LeDoux interposed

bitterly, "but I'm damned if I'll look to you or the law for it!"

The muscles along Wick Billings' wide jaw tightened. "Meanin' just what, LeDoux?"

Carter LeDoux rocked forward heavily to the porch edge. "Meanin' I think it's a damned, crooked business when a convicted murderer is sent to rod Two Rivers law! Law, hell! There hasn't been any, an' there won't be any."

"You'll get the law, whether you think so or not," promised Wick Billings bleakly.

LeDoux flung that off with a shake of his head. "I ain't a damned idiot. I wish to God I'd let 'em hang you a year ago when you had it comin'! Hang-rope law didn't pardon a skunk because he had money or a slick story. There's still honest men in this country, an' I'll warn you fair. We ain't lookin' to you. There's little to be said for vigilantes, but they're takin' to their saddles again in Two Rivers. They'll deal out the same blood-law we had 'fore we got tricked into thinkin' the Territory would do it. If that's a warnin' to you, take it. We'll break your neck from a tree limb as fast as we would any other murderin' coyote's."

"Don't try it, LeDoux! The law will hang any man that makes a play at killin' behind a mask!"

Shaking with rage, Carter LeDoux threw up an arm. "Get out of here! To hell with your fine talk. The Governor may have swallowed it, but it don't go down here. Get off my place, an' if there's an ounce of honest guts in you, you'll keep ridin'!"

Wick Billings looked at Marlene LeDoux, standing behind her father. Only the sight of her kept him from crying out desperately that Breck, not he, was the murderer of Jed Carr. But instead, he pulled the gray around and raked spurs along its flanks.

The chill of the night struck into him, sharpening the bitter and angry emotions in his heart. He had expected the help of the honest element, led by Carter LeDoux. He needed it, or his cause was a lost one. And that cause was to wipe out the brand of lawlessness which had killed his father, Joshua Billings. He had pledged himself to that. But now a stinging premonition took hold of him. A premonition that he would never be able to fulfill that pledge . . . .

THEY buried old Rip Tolley the following morning. There wasn't much of a service, nor many people. When the last of the gravelly dirt had been shovelled on top of the crude pine coffin, Wick Billings' gray eyes were narrowed and cold.

The loungers who had come along for curiosity's sake began to drift back toward the town. A bowlegged oldster, stooped of shoulder, his leathery brown neck wrinkled and corded, touched Wick Billings on the arm.

"Yo're Billings, ain't you? Signed on to sheriff this here hell-hole?"

Wick nodded briefly.

"Mebbe you rec'llect me. Baldy Sayre. I rode fer yore daddy 'fore he come north. You was knee-high to a hopper, so's mebbe you don't, at that. Rip Tolley an' me caught on with yore daddy's outfit the same year."

Wick Billings let his eyes drop to the fresh mound of earth and the carved headboard he had placed there. "What I wanted to tell you," the oldster went on, "was that two-three of us thought a heap o' Rip. And we figger that a gent who'd walk into a shoot-out on Rip's account is worth tyin' too. I reckon you know yo're goin' to have the devil an' all to whup 'fore you're through here. Well, if you get to a point where a few extry gun-hands kin be used, pass me the word."

The old man thrust out a gnarled hand and Wick Billings gripped it. "Thanks,

Baldy. If the time comes, you can bank it won't be a job Rip would have been ashamed to touch."

"I figgered that—though some folks are sayin' different. Mebbe you knew that while you was jailed up Rip put in his time lookin' for the snake that killed yore daddy. Good huntin', feller."

Two days went by slowly. Hard, grim days for Wick Billings. There was a tension in the town he could sense. The cold threat offered by Ben Patchett's hardcases he ignored, but that scored him deeply was the hostility and scorn of the honest men he had counted on for support. They didn't trust him! They didn't want him.

The showdown was brewing. A man with his back to the wall, Wick Billings waited for it.

On the third night, Billings had kicked off his boots and was lying on his hotel cot. About nine o'clock footsteps came rapidly down the corridor, and knuckles tapped at the door.

Billings got up, a hand on his gun. By the flickering light of a wall-bracketed lamp he recognized a gaunt, broad-shouldered oldtimer who had been present at Rip Tolley's burying.

"Baldy figgered you'd want to know," the man offered casually. "There's been a shootin' at the Longhorn. Somethin' funny about it."

Wick Billings went back for his hat, and buckled on his gun belt. But when he let himself out into the hall, the man was gone. His nerves peculiarly tight, Billings went out into the street, walking swiftly.

The Longhorn was only half full. Stepping inside, Billings felt instantly the impact of the hostility there. Yet there was an odd shading to it; and he was aware that his life was not, at this moment, in danger. Men were lounging at the bar and at tables. Some were standing up. Talk was only a low murmur. A chill gripped the big room of the saloon.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Blood-Law of the Vigilantes

UNACCOUNTABLY disturbed, Billings walked in among the crowd there at the Longhorn. The body of a man, dressed in black, lay face up on a table. Half of Wick's attention focused on him. "Square Tony" Boyle, the man's name had been. A gambler. A bullet had smashed into his face just above the nose; another had drilled a clean hole in his forehead.

"Anybody see it done?" Billings asked evenly.

Dead silence answered him. Every pair of eyes in the room was fastened on him with sneering antagonism.

"You, barkeeper?" The lawman's voice was thin. "Who was playin' at the table with Boyle?"

The beefy-faced barman squinted at a glass he was polishing. "How in hell would I know? Where was you, if it comes to that? All I heard was the bustin' of the window when he got away."

The window nearest the table at the far side of the room was shattered. Wick Billings looked toward it and away again. Anger ripped through him as he realized he was being made a fool of. He let his hand settle to gun butt.

From the corner of his eyes he caught a slight movement near the door. Baldy Sayre was slouched against the wall. Billings had passed him unnoticed on the way in. Almost imperceptibly, Baldy Sayre was shaking his head in a silent signal. A moment later the oldster slipped outside.

Wick Billings forced a grin. "You win, boys. Boyle's iron fell out of his lap an' went off twice by accident. I'll drink, barkeep, to a gun that's got brains."

The drink took the knot out of Wick Billings' stomach. Still careful, he drifted

outside. Baldy Sayre was waiting for him in the shadows.

"You saw it, did you, Baldy?"

"Yep. Time's short, kid. A nester, name of Whitlock, done the shootin'. But it had been framed to work out differently. Whitlock has collared a chunk of land that Ben Patchett wants, and he was slated to be killed. Only Whitlock was too fast for 'em. When Tony Boyle stacked the deal, Whitlock popped two slugs into him an' jumped out the winder."

Billings grunted. "Damned if I'll jail him for that."

"That ain't all, kid. Patchett thinks fast. He's seen a chance, through it, to get a knife into you. He's told it that Whitlock is a real hardcase; that Whitlock tried to cheat Boyle an' then killed him. He's sent a man to sell Cart LeDoux on that notion. The vigilantes will be ridin' tonight, kid. Throwin' it up into your face."

Wick Billings said grimly, "Where's Whitlock's place?"

"'Bout two mile up the north fork of the river. You can't miss it. If you'd like a man or so to trail along, kid . . . ."

Billings shook his head. "Not this time, Baldy. If one man can't stop 'em, half a dozen can't. It's my job."

"Damn a man that thinks he's got to play a lone hand so's his friends won't git hurt," complained old Baldy. "Rip could've had help if'n he'd so much as whispered—" But Baldy was talking to the empty night air. Wick Billings was running for the livery and his horse.

Once clear of the town, Billings rode hard up the river trail. The moon had come out and was casting a silver sheen on the smoothly flowing water to his left. Slightly more than an hour brought him to the forks. He turned north, and minutes later he was riding up to a mud-chinked log cabin set on a knoll above the banks of the stream. Light shone feebly from a blanketed window.

In response to his knock the light went out, the door opened and a rifle barrel prodded him suddenly in the belly. "If you're totin' a gun, mister, drop it. Who are you?"

"Billings. Two Rivers sheriff, Whitlock. Meanin' you no harm."

"You're the only one that ain't by this time, I reckon. Git that lamp goin', Maw. Come in, Sheriff, if you ain't lyin'. If you are, I'll shore as hell plug you. I ain't goin' to jail for downin' a crooked tinhorn who drawed first."

THE light went up, and inside the one-room cabin Wick Billings examined the two people before him. Whitlock was of middle age, big, but stooped and bent from hard physical toil. His thick, uncut hair was graying, and there was a look of determination on his stubborn face. His wife was slight of build, her face lined and care-worn but possessing a hint of purpose that coincided with her husband's.

Wick Billings said curtly, "I got word that a pack of crooked vigilantes are comin' here."

"So? Leave 'em come, damn their mangy hides."

Billings looked at the woman. "Might be the smart thing, ma'am, for you an' your husband to pull out till this blows over. You, anyhow."

The woman stared at her husband. "Not unless Dave wants to."

"Pull out?" the settler growled. "What in hell kind of talk is that? This here's our home. The law's on our side, ain't it? You're the law, Sheriff. An' I got another law in Ol' Lobo here. First damn vigilante through that door will git blowed in two."

Wick Billings couldn't bring himself to look straight at Whitlock or his wife. They trusted him. They thought he could help them.

He muttered thickly, "I'm bound to tell you, Whitlock, they'd as soon put a

slug in me as in you. The devils have had the run of things here for a long time. Right now, pullin' out would be best."

"Not me, Sheriff." Whitlock pulled the door open, stared out into the night. Faintly there came the far off echo of many hammering hoofs. "Still time fer *you* to skin out," he pronounced bleakly, "if you feel that way about it."

"You're a damned fool," said Wick Billings, "but I'm with you."

He took the pistol out of his holster, slipped a cartridge into the chamber under the hammer. None of the three spoke. Whitlock checked the nipple of his rifle, then rummaged under the bed and drew out a cap-and-ball revolver. It was already loaded; he began methodically to affix the caps.

The beating of hoofs swelled into a clattering roar as a string of riders pulled to a sliding halt in front of the cabin. Voices muttered for a moment. Then a voice bawled, "You, Whitlock! Come on out here!"

Billings put a hand on Whitlock's brawny arm. "I'll go. Might be, they can be stopped."

Wick did not know whether or not a withering blast of gunfire would meet him when he opened the door. He did open it and step out. The light in the cabin had been put out.

Moonlight filtered down over a grim scene. Guns were glittering in the hands of a score or more riders who were jostling and milling in what was roughly a triple half circle in front of the cabin. All but one were masked. Only massive, gray-bearded Carter LeDoux scorned that cowardice.

It was LeDoux who spoke. From deep in his throat he said, "You'll do well not to mix in this, Billings. We want Whitlock."

Breck LeDoux, Billings saw, was by his father's side. There was no sign of Ben Patchett. Billings said, "While I'm sheriff here, LeDoux, no one but the law touches a man who may or may not have committed a crime."

"Law?" cried Carter LeDoux bitterly. "Your law is worse than none! Whitlock murdered a man in cold blood tonight. Only a murderer would try to shield him."

SAVAGELY, Wick Billings demanded, "What kind of law do you call it that sets twenty masked coyotes to pull down one man?"

LeDoux's bearded face was like molten metal. "It's the devil's business, but it's got to be done. It takes violence to stamp out violence. Stand away from that door!"

"Come through it, LeDoux, if you want to lose some of the rats with you, doin' it! You've been framed into this. Whitlock is no more guilty than you are. Let the thing rest till the law can decide it!"

"Your law turned one killer loose an' sent him back to us," grated LeDoux. "Get out of the way, Billings!"

A roar broke from leathery lungs at Wick Billings' shoulder. "Dave Whitlock asks no man to take lead that's meant for him. Here I am, you crooked whelps of hell! Take me if you're a mind to!"

His old muzzle-loader gripped in work-splayed fingers, Whitlock crowded up beside Billings. And by her breathing, Wick knew that Whitlock's wife was beside him.

A jeering yell went up from the vigilantes.

Whitlock shouted. "So you aim to hang me, eh? Hang an honest man fer killin' a tinhorn who drawed first. Damn you, you won't git close enough to me to—"

A sudden shrill scream from the woman made Wick Billings jerk his head toward her. Before he could turn back a gun had sent up a crashing wave of sound into the night sky.

There was only the single shot. No way

of telling from what point in the packed ranks of the vigilantes it had come. Dave Whitlock's work-hardened body sank down, fell into the dirt in front of the cabin.

Sobbing, the woman flung herself down beside her husband. A killing rage in his eyes, Wick Billings crouched there in the doorway, poised for the onslaught of lead he expected. There was none. The dark mass of the vigilantes broke up. They began to drift away, silently.

Wick Billings picked up the settler and carried him into the cabin.

He knew as soon as he examined the ragged hole in the man's chest that there was no hope. He did what little he could for him, but by the end of an hour and a half Dave Whitlock was dead.

Wick Billings looked at the woman once—holding tightly to the dead hand of her husband, as if to call back the life that had fled—and could not look again. Her stolid, silent grief tore at him like knives.

The pain in Billings' own mind was wickedly bitter. The blame was his and no one else's. First Rip Tolley, and now this man . . . . Instead of bringing law into the Two Rivers country he had brought dissension and death! Had any other man come from the Governor, Carter LeDoux would not have turned vigilante again.

The fact hammered home to Billings with cruel force: there could be no law, no peace, in the Two Rivers country, while he remained! That vision he had had of an honest law could be achieved in only one way—if he, Wick Billings had no part in it! His own name must go uncleared. The monument to his father's memory must remain unbuilt by his hand.

Billings said softly to the woman, "I've got to go now. I'll come back before I leave for good."

She didn't hear him, and Wick Billings let himself out into the night. He was going to Carter LeDoux to tell him that he was through as a lawman . . . .

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Posse of Broken Man

THE night was like arctic cold to Wick Billings as he rode through it. He rode without hurry, like a man in a stupor. He was not eager to hasten what would be the hardest moment of his life.

He followed the river trail to the forks, forded the river there and struck out along an abandoned freighting road which led by a short cut to LeDoux's Bar T.

Half an hour along that road brought him the steady beat of a horse racing toward him. Billings stopped, let his gaze run ahead over the moon-flooded prairie. The shape of this midnight rider floated out of it, came scudding at him like a black wraith. Close to him now, Wick Billings saw that it was Marlene LeDoux. He had drawn his gun; he slipped it back.

Stiffly unsure of himself, Billings watched her as she pulled in the madly heaving pony. The girl's hat was gone. Even in the moonlight the look of stark suffering on her face was too plain to miss.

She was close to him, her broken voice pleading. "Wick! I—I had to find you, Wick. Dad's been shot! On the way home, tonight. I don't know where they'd been—he and Breck."

"Where is he now?"

"He's at the ranch. He's—he's dying, I think."

Wick Billings said stonily, "We'll go there."

They rode together, but no words passed between them. Into a segment of Wick Billings' brain crept the thought that Marlene had ridden to find him. He blotted that hope out immediately and ruthlessly. He was the law, such as it

was. In trouble, she had ridden to the law, not to him.

At the ranch, Billings quit his horse and, without waiting for Marlene, took the porch steps two at a time. Breck LeDoux was pacing the front room, a cigarette, which had gone out, twitching in his fingers.

Billings stopped by him, contempt in his eyes. "No need of my sayin' that Patchett did it, an' that it was you he was after," he snapped. "How'd it happen they missed you?"

Breck LeDoux's pasty face went even whiter. "I—I don't know what you're talkin' about. We was ridin' together through them rocks—when three guns opened up on us. They got the old man. I grabbed his bridle—an' rode for it. That's all I know."

"Damn your dirty heart, Breck. Your own dad, an' you haven't got the guts to break away from Patchett to help him! Where's Cart now?"

Breck nodded helplessly to a door at the back of the room. Billings went through it. A gaunt-faced man in shirt sleeves, whom Billings knew to be the cook, was working over Carter LeDoux on the bed.

"How bad?" Billings asked steadily.

The man looked up. "Plenty bad. Slug smashed his collar bone an' there's another through his chest. Hit a lung, maybe. We got a man ridin' fer the reg'lar sawbones."

The sound of quick, hurried breathing made Wick turn. Marlene had followed him into the room. That quality in her blue eyes stung him now as it had before. Her hand was at her throat as she tried to control her voice.

"Wick, dad wouldn't tell you, that night you were here, but he's in serious trouble."

Billings studied her keenly. "That herd of his comin' up from Texas?"

Marlene nodded. "He knew he'd have to fight to get it through. He didn't think —Wick, he's lost it! A man rode in this afternoon. Half of the trail crew was killed. God knows where the cattle are by now. Dad was going to ride down tonight, but this other thing came up, and he went there, first. Wick, dad told me how much that herds means—to the Territory! It wouldn't be so much for dad's sake, Wick, if you—"

Something in Wick Billings rose in angry revolt. He stood staring grimly at this girl he loved—the daughter of Carter LeDoux. Carter LeDoux had ruthlessly smashed his career as a lawman, had wrecked all of his hungry hopes that hinged upon that career. Now Carter LeDoux, through his daughter, was turning for help to the lawman he had damned!

To hell with Carter LeDoux and his troubles. Let failure burn and torture him as it had Wick Billings!

WRATHFUL refusal lifted to the sheriff's lips, but he did not utter the words. The stark picture Governor Rand Gorst had painted for him came into his mind. On that contract herd hinged the fate of the Territory. If it could not be brought into Two Rivers there was certain to be a bloody Indian uprising during the winter. Ben Patchett's crooked scheming would succeed. Gorst would be thrown out, and the Territory would become the prey of vicious, selfish interests. The things old Joshua Billings had stood for would be wiped out.

Without looking at the girl Wick Billings said, "I'll go. I'll come back with the herd, or not at all. Tell Carter LeDoux that."

He wheeled out of the room and went to Breck in front of the big stone fireplace. He put the muzzle of his sixgun hard into Breck's belly.

"We're goin' south," he snarled. "Both of us. If you want a slug through your guts now, start hangin' back."

There were four men at the ranch. Wick Billings picked them up. With them at his heels he rode into Two Rivers. Though it was early morning, Baldy Sayre was leaning against the bar in the Longhorn, downing one whiskey after another.

"Had to wait up, kid," he pronounced thickly, "to learn how it came out. I was killin' Ben Patchett if'n you didn't come back."

He grinned when Billings told him what he wanted. "Might be there's two-three of the boys that'd figger they was gettin' in a lick fer Rip Tolley an' old Josh."

There were ten of them, it developed, when Baldy Sayre herded them to the meeting place outside of town. They were rawhide and gristle oldtimers.

The cavalcade struck south through the darkness, Wick Billings' gray pounding in the lead.

"Five thousand head of beef steers can't be hid in a man's vest pocket," Baldy pointed out, "or they can't be pushed so far but what we're bound to pick up on 'em fast."

Billings didn't answer. Harsh though the thoughts in his mind were, they were clear. To hell with Carter LeDoux. He, Wick Billings, would do this last job if it could be done. And after it—to hell with the law, and to hell with the torment it had brought him. This one thing he would do for the memory of his father.

They changed horses at dawn, ran on through rolling sagebrush hills. It was past noon when Breck LeDoux pulled up alongside Wick Billings. Some inner struggle had drawn his pasty face into harassed lines.

"By God, Billings," he blurted, "I ain't as bad as you think. Hear what I got to tell you, damn it. About that—"

Contempt was too keen in Wick Billings to allow him to listen. "Shut up!" he ripped out savagely. "You'll ride now, an' fight when the time for fightin' comes. If you don't, I'll kill you like I would any jelly-gutted coyote."

The first color Wick Billings had ever seen there rushed into Breck LeDoux's white face. He fell back without replying.

Relaying their mounts, Indian fashion, the seventeen hard-eyed riders hurtled southward, pounding through the last dimness of day and into the night again. Half of that night was gone when old Baldy Sayre's shouted order brought them to a halt. His plains-wise old eyes had picked up the faint, ruddy gleam of a fire far to the east.

"Ain't likely it's Ben Patchett's boys —if it was him that got the herd," he stated. "They wouldn't be riskin' a fire this soon. I'm bettin' we'll find what's left of the trail crew there. Got to look, anyhow."

SAYRE was right. A scant handful of gaunt, bearded men came out of the shadows away from the smouldering fire when Wick Billings rode up to it. More than half of them were wounded.

The trail boss, an extraordinarily tall man with black hair hanging down to buckskin-clad shoulders, answered Wick Billings' curt questions between blasts of bitter curses.

"They 'bushed us four days ago, damn their rotten, killin' souls to hell! We was twenty-three men then. They whittled us down to the eight yuh see here."

"How many of 'em?"

"Thirty anyhow. Maybe forty of the back-shootin', pig-lovin' sons. It was dark when they hit us."

"Scatter the herd, did they?"

"Scatter hell! It's worth too much. They had a mite of trouble roundin' it up, but they're headin' southeast with it. Aimin' for a shippin' point in Kansas, I reckon. I been tailin' 'em, hangin' back enough so's I wouldn't miss you if you come. I sent a man to kill a bronc gettin'

to LeDoux but I wasn't sure he'd get through."

"Where's the herd now?"

"'Bout twenty mile southeasterly, near as I can figger it."

His face harshly shadowed by the ebbing flames, Wick Billings snapped, "Saddle up, all of you that can ride. If you're shy on shells, get a beltful from Baldy Sayre."

Eight men, two of whom had to be helped from the ground, climbed into leather and swung in grimly behind Wick Billings. There was a vicious, purposeful ring in the hoof-roar surging around Billings. The star-dappled night sky hung brooding and close.

A banner of dingy gray had crept into the east when Wick Billings topped a sagebrush covered rise and wheeled back immediately behind it. A quarter of a mile beyond, just becoming visible, was the dark spreading mass of the herd. The vast sea of backs and spiky horns stretched away until it blurred and merged with the farther dark. They had been run hard the previous day, evidently, and were still down.

Wick Billings looked over his shoulder. Twenty-four men had knotted up behind him. Some of them were cripples. Most of them were bullet-slashed and year-scarred. Down below were forty seasoned gun-slammers, hired for murder, and callously ready for it. And they were backing a man who would turn bloody hell loose in a new Territory—Ben Patchett!

Wick Billings thought of that as he looked at the men behind him. In a voice queerly husky he said, "When you see a diamond-back, you kill it. That's what we got to do now. They got the odds, two to one. Me, I'm going down there not aimin' to ride back 'less those rattlers are wiped out or gone. Each one of you boys can play it the way you figure it's best for you. That's all. Don't shoot till you get a target."

No one needed to utter approval. A mutter of deep-chested oaths rippled behind Billings as he raked spurs along sweat-caked flanks. He was riding the gray again; the goaded animal's haunch muscles bunched as it buck-jumped the slope and spun down the far side.

Hoofs rattled in a sudden blare of sound behind him. Billings turned his head in the rush of wind, shouted to Breck LeDoux racing beside him, "Show your guts, damn you, or I'll open them up!"

Breck's face was twisted. He carried a pistol in his right hand. He snarled, "I'll see you in hell!"

Belching gun flame ripped apart the murky sky ahead of him. The camp had come alive. The wide-throttled wind running across that flat had carried a warning to Patchett's renegades. Wick Billings' lips parted in a gargoyle's wicked grin. The warning had not come soon enough.

Less than a hundred yards of that quarter mile remained. Off to the right and left guns began to hammer. The crisp, sharp bark of rifles bit through the air. Guards, probably, Billings thought; luck had let him slip between them.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Hell's Lawman

DEAD ahead, the camp had became a turbulent pattern of movement. Indistinct figures leaped, shifted, ran in the dim half light. Men sprang out of blankets, jumped for hobbled horses, stiffened to throw lead at the line of riders charging at them.

"Close enough!" Billings muttered between his teeth.

He triggered, and the gun in his hand kicked out a deadly, whining slug. A jerky spattering of explosions roared into the sky from his back. Someone started

a rebel yell, shrill and strangely faint; it ended in a shriek and a blood-choked rattle, and Billings knew he had lost one man.

Chunks of orange-red flame laced the gray gloom in front of him. He picked his targets with icy, emotionless care. He had to save his shots—he was looking for one man.

The gray shied suddenly to miss an outlaw who, on his knees, was lifting a sixgun in two bleeding hands. Staring into that black muzzle, Wick Billings shot grimly. The outlaw fell on his side and dropped behind.

Over the clatter of exploding guns there lifted abruptly a mighty, thundering wave of sound—twenty thousand hoofs gouging frantically into dirt and sod. The terrific volume of it overwhelmed every other noise. Voices were wholly lost; cartridges exploded in weird silence. Wick Billings' eardrums were pounding in against his brain.

He was in the middle of the camp now. A hand reached up for him as he flung by. He smashed down with the barrel of his gun, felt bone shatter beneath it.

The men behind him had poured into the camp, and the place was a welter of fighting, cursing men. Only a few of the outlaws had gotten to their horses; the rest were afoot, fighting with savage desperation, in complete disorder.

The brief picture Wick Billings had of that fight seared his brain like a hot iron. It was terrible and merciless. Texas trail hands were paying off for comrades slaughtered from ambush. And to Baldy Sayre's veterans the gutter scum were paying bloody toll for the lives of Rip Tolley and old Joshua Billings.

Wick Billings was astride again when Baldy Sayre, his horse shot from under him, a red smear running down his wrinkled face, staggered to his side.

"Patchett!" the oldster yelled. "He's gettin' clear! Knocked over my bronc when I tried to foller him!" Sayre flung out an arm to point.

Billings jerked his head, pulled the gray over, ripped steel along the animal's sides.

So Ben Patchett had been here, as he had hoped! The hot fury left Billings' mind, and in its place came a sharp clarity, a focusing to one object and one only. Ben Patchett could not escape; he could not live. If he did, his reign of terror would continue. And it was not odd that he should be here. This was to be his coup, the stroke which would bring turmoil to the Territory and ruin to Governor Rand Gorst. Patchett had not dared trust it to anyone else.

A low hill fell behind Wick Billings, and ahead, outlined against the brilliant disk of the sun on the horizon, he saw a horseman. Blocky shoulders labeled him. The rider turned his head, and even at the distance Billings could make out the blunt forehead and blunt jaws of Ben Patchett.

It was then that Billings became aware of a rider close at his heels. He flipped his gun around as he looked, then scowled. Breck LeDoux was crowding up beside him, spurring cruelly.

THE look on Breck LeDoux's pasty face was one of intense hatred. He jerked his head at the sheriff as if gesturing him to go back. A contemptuous snarl came to Billings' lips. He turned his head away from LeDoux.

The situation had changed abruptly. Recognizing that he was being rapidly overhauled, Ben Patchett had chosen his ground and elected to make a stand. He had dismounted and was resting a sixgun across the hollow of his saddle.

It happened swiftly then. Breck LeDoux slashed down with the barrel of his gun at the nose of Billings' mount. The stinging pain made the gray swerve mad-

ly, almost pitching Billings out of the saddle. For fifty yards the gray went at right angles before he could stop it. He swore at what he saw then.

Breck had gone tearing on toward Patchett, shooting as he rode, pounding lead at Patchett's head which rose from behind the saddle.

Puffs of smoke were spouting from Patchett's short-gun muzzle. Unruffled and unhurried, he was using his rest to advantage. A wild hope that Breck LeDoux would make it took shape in Billings' mind. Breck had trimmed down the distance to forty feet, and was still shooting.

The next moment Breck LeDoux shuddered visibly from the impact of a bullet, tumbled out of the saddle and lay twisted in a sandy open space. He did not move.

An oath cracked in Wick Billings' throat. He lifted his own weapon and shot, but the range was too great for accuracy. Calmly Ben Patchett shifted his revolver and opened up again.

Billings felt a slug nip at his ribs, as he rode in. Another slashed along his thigh and he felt the agonizing pain of a scraped bone as the bullet struck his hip. He was close enough now so that the skill in his gun hand should be able to put lead between Patchett's eyes. He shot twice before the realization drove home that his skill, his accuracy, were gone! His numbed shoulder . . . that fall from the gray . . . he couldn't command his muscles. His bullets were going wild!

Patchett recognized that, apparently, for he took his time for the next shot. Billings saw the muzzle of the gun tilt across the saddle, center on his face. He saw the blunt forefinger tighten on the trigger. He was to die, and Ben Patchett was to ride on!

A sixgun that was not Patchett's snarled sharply, and Ben Patchett's blocky forehead, which had been clear one instant, was marred the next by a bullet hole. He slumped down and fell on his face as his pony danced away.

Breck LeDoux, who had managed somehow to climb to his feet, let the yet smoking gun drop from his fingers. Reeling, he too stumbled and fell.

Minutes later, when Baldy Sayre and two others rode up from the camp, Billings was trying to stop the flow of blood from the wound in Breck's stomach.

Old Baldy said, "We lost plenty, kid, but we cleaned 'em out. What happened here?"

"Breck here killed Patchett. He——"

Breck LeDoux's eyes were opening. He stared at Wick Billings, and by a supreme summoning of his ebbing strength he moved his lips.

"I reckon I kind of paid off—didn't I, Wick? Nobody to blame—but myself. If you'd shake hands with me, Wick—I'd sure like it. Thanks. It was Patchett killed your dad, Wick—'cause he had the beef contract. Then he framed you—thinkin' you was due to get it. It was me that stole your knife an' then killed Jed Carr. Patchett wanted Carr out of the way an' it was a good chance—to get you too. I've hated myself for doin' it!—but I was afraid—afraid...."

His voice trailed off. Breck LeDoux, whose strain of manhood had come out too late, was dead.

Baldy Sayre stated grimly, "We all heard him, kid. That'll clear you, I reckon."

Wick Billings got slowly to his feet. "Nope. He saved my life, an' he's dead now. I can't pin that dirty killin' on him now. Neither could you."

IT TOOK ten days to gather the herd and push it the rest of the way into Two Rivers. Wick Billings rode out alone to the LeDoux ranch.

The setting sun threw a rosy glow over

the sheds and corrals and over the ranch house. There was a man, Billings saw from a distance, sitting with both arms braced on his chair on the wide front porch. Those massive shoulders could belong to no one but Carter LeDoux. A moment later, sight of the full gray beard and the piercing eyes, confirmed it.

Wick Billings dismounted and strode to the porch. He didn't understand a peculiar quality in LeDoux's stare. LeDoux, he saw, was bandaged and could not rise.

The old man turned his shaggy head and called, "Marlene!"

She came out and stood by her father's chair. The sun brought out the rich glow of her cheeks, made the blue of her eyes a thing that caught the heart. His love for her made Wick's breath come hard. Whatever happened, he would carry with him this picture of her.

He said, "Breck died, ten days ago. Nine other good men died with him, LeDoux—savin' the herd. He died like a man, an' a hell of a brave one, LeDoux. It was somethin' you can be mighty proud of. He——"

Carter LeDoux lifted a gnarled hand. "He may have died like a brave man, an' for that I'm thankful. He didn't live like one."

Those words staggered Wick Billings. He saw what he had missed before—that Carter LeDoux was a broken man.

"My son was a black scoundrel," LeDoux said heavily. "A weakling. A murderer. May God never punish you as he has punished me, Billings. It was before my eyes and I didn't see it. No one but my daughter could have made me believe it."

Unbelief in his eyes, Wick Billings looked at Marlene.

She said, "There were two knives, Wick, weren't there?"

Billings unfastened the leather-wrapped parcel from behind his saddle, carried the two identical hunting knives up onto the porch and laid them in Carter LeDoux's hands.

Marlene was speaking again, her voice hurt but steady. "While you were in prison—I found the second one when I was cleaning Breck's room. It had fallen down, somehow, behind the big wardrobe which we hardly ever move. I guessed then what must have happened. That he had stolen yours, and lost it. And that he had had to make another one like it. We all know he had a knack for things like that."

"Then it was you who sent it to the Governor," demanded Wick hoarsely, "knowin' that maybe it would pin the murder on Breck?"

Marlene LeDoux's eyes were fixed on him with a steadiness and a light he could not mistake. "I couldn't do anything else," she whispered. "I was afraid to tell father—then. I hoped that maybe Breck—himself—But when he didn't, and you had to force him to go with you—"

"She came to me," Carter LeDoux broke in.

Wick Billings heard that only faintly. He was close to Marlene LeDoux, so close her soft breath was on his cheek. That quality in her blue eyes, he recognized now, was love.

She whispered, "I wrote you every day, while you were in prison. I gave the letters to Breck. Did he——?"

"It doesn't matter," said Wick Billings. "Not now." His arms went around this woman he loved. For ten days he had seen nothing but black hell before him. Now that dissolved in the deep mystery of her eyes, and he saw hope and life shining there.

THE END

**Thrilling novelette of boothill's call to arms**

# His Guardian—The Killer!

AFTER the Pearl City bank job, Red, Buzzer and Lem split up, Lem Stewart angling westerly for the Squaw Saddle hideaway. Lem had been alone in his hidden camp on Squaw Saddle for a week, chewing the bitter cud of reflection, when Slip Hooker drifted into camp. Slip, buzzard eyed and voluble, had been called the road-runner of the owlhoot trails. He had a long twitching nose, and was as full of gossip as a magpie.

Squatting there on his heels before the fire, he told Lem Stewart that Red and Buzzer were in the clear and heading for the Blue Mountain Mesa country. Two members of a law posse had run into the Harvey boys out in the malpais and the hapless badge-toters had been lugged back to Pearl City across their saddles.

**Thrilling novelette of boothill's call to arms**

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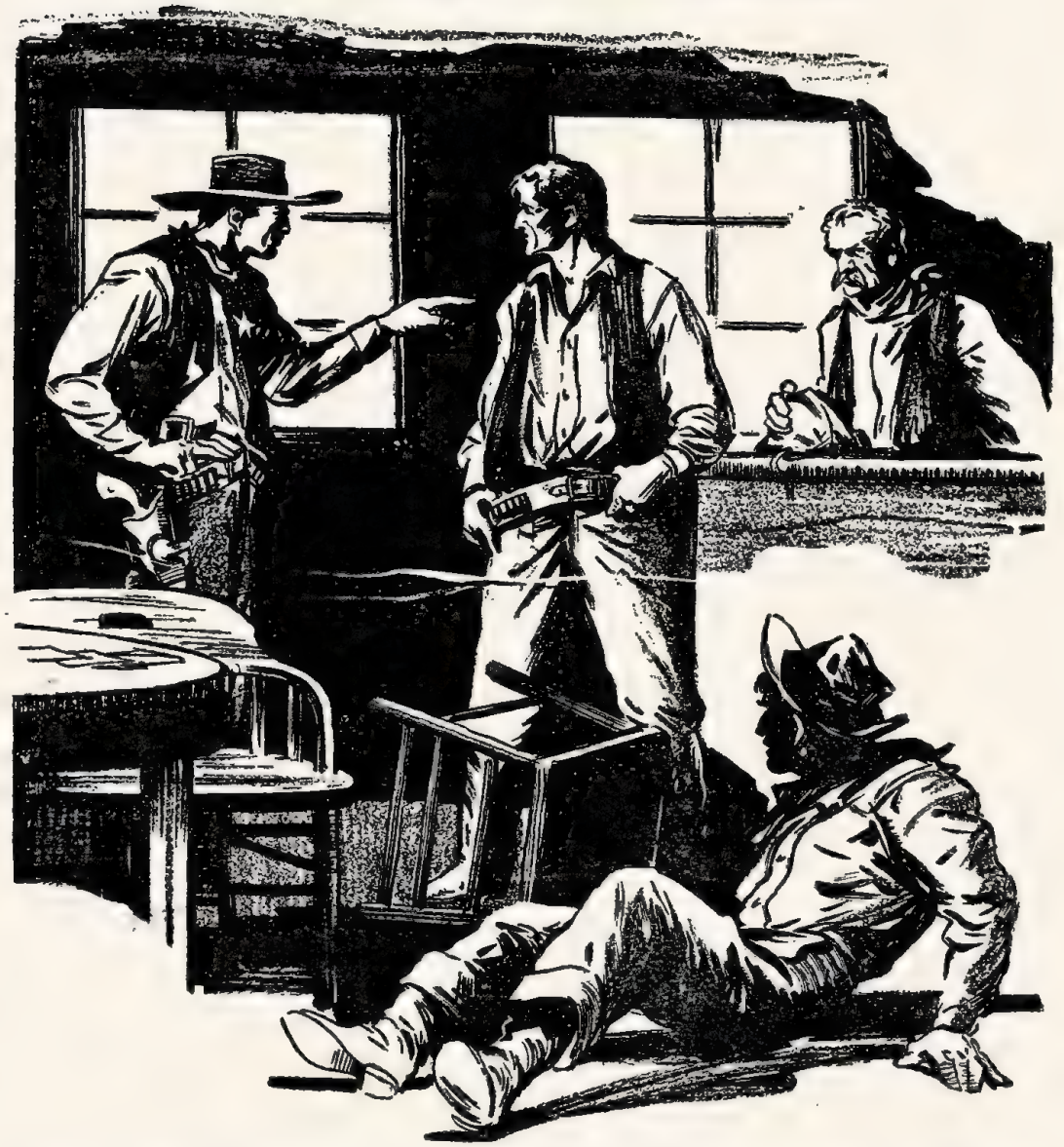
**By George H. Michener**



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in miniature strokes along the polished butts of his guns.

Slip went to work on the pot of mulligan Lem had simmering by the fire.

Between lip-smackings he observed that Jalspur had as tough a crew of gunies as you'd find from the Tonto to Jackson Hole, and with Sheriff Brad Humber out of the way, he'd sweep the range from one end of Bear Valley to the other. Harry Cracken, the Caldwell gunslick, would take care of Sheriff Brad Humber. The great gunman was probably on his way to Horn City right now.

Slip finished the mulligan and opened the one air-tight of preserved peaches in camp. Slip was full of admiration for Jalspur. No fifty-dollar dry-gulchers for Jalspur when he wanted an important job done! Jalspur was the kind who put up his money and hired the best. Harry Cracken would give Humber an even break and cut him down, so there'd be no kick-back there. Trust Jalspur to keep his nose clean! There was a rumor, too, that with Humber planted, Jalspur was going to pin Humber's law badge on Harry Cracken.

Lem Stewart was hugging his knees, his somber eyes burning into the fire embers. Slip licked the last dollop of peach jam off his chin and tossed the empty air-tight over his shoulder. He began building a smoke with Lem's makings.

"Somethin' else Harry Cracken kinda hinted at," Slip went on in his high nasal twang. He glanced at Lem maliciously. "Harry and me was talkin' last week, that was when I seen him at the Dutchman's, and Harry said the way you and Brad Humber was supposed to hate each other he could never figger out why both of you was still alive. I was tellin' Harry that mebbe there was a tie-up between you and Brad that nobody—"

Quick as a mountain cat, Lem was over the fire and had Slip Hooker by the throat. He shook Slip till his teeth clacked. Shook him till his eyes bulged like half-squeezed grapes and his tongue filled his mouth like a fat, red sponge.

"Slip, you lying, slinking kioty," Lem said softly. "You ever give up head again about there being a tie-up between me and Humber, and you'll die. Understand, Slip?"

He left Slip gagging and writhing by the fire and moved back into the shadow of the evergreens. When he returned, leading his horse, Slip was sitting up, moaning and clutching at his throat.

Lem swung into the saddle and surveyed the hootowl news-bringer contemptuously. "I'm heading south, Slip."

Slip shook his head. "God, Lem. . ." he gasped. "No need tuh go off in a temper thataway. You've—"

"I said I'm heading south. Don't forget."

"Sure—sure, Lem. I'll remember." Slip's long nose quivered piteously. His eyes were all watery reproach. "Hell, Lem, I wouldn't tell anybody where you. . . . "

Lem reined the raw-boned dun around and out of the circle of firelight. He pulled up at the turn of the trail and looked back. Slip, sharply silhouetted, was hunkered by the fire trying to roll another cigarette, his snaky neck weaving from side to side.

Overhead the low sagging clouds inked out the stars. The night gloom was impenetrable; the air oppressive, dead. From somewhere to the east came the single report of a rifle, muted by distance, seeming to hang in the air with the resonance of a far-away bell.

A faint tremor shook little Lem Stewart. "I've kept my word, Brad," he muttered hoarsely. "Twenty years, Brad—and, damn you, I've kept it!" Then he leaned forward and touched the dun. "Go on," he commanded. "Get going."

Ears pricking cautiously, the dun moved away into the night—north toward Bear Valley. . . .

RAIN trailed down from the sag-bellied clouds. Three days of it had the dun slogging, fetlock deep, into Horn City's main street.

The plank walks lay in dark sheened planes dappled with gold where the lights slanted from the false-fronted business structures. The livery stable was a black maw, a lantern gleaming far back in its cavernous depths. Planking echoed in hollow cadence beneath the dun's hoofs. Lem whistled and the lantern bobbed toward him.

The hostler was a big man with a flat, fungus-gray face. Indifference was his stock-in-trade. You could leave your nag in the corral or put him in a stall. It was cheaper outside, but it was drier inside.

The hostler put the dun in a stall, answering all questions with an air of supreme detachment:

The law in Horn City? That would be Sheriff Brad Humber. Brad and his boy lived at the end of the street. The little place set back a piece with the two cottonwoods in front.

Yes, there was lots of strangers in town—always was. Coming and going mostly. A lean-necked gent with a long nose? No, he hadn't noticed one in particular. Not today. But that didn't signify nothing. There might be lots of gents in town with lean necks and long noses. Coming and going. . . .

The hostler was too indifferent for Lem Stewart. His air of detachment was too studied. There was a suggestion of keen awareness and interrogation in his answers, and a suggestion of hidden power behind the seeming flabbiness of his big body.

Lem peered at his bloodless gray face and said, "You mentioned the sheriff's boy. What's his name?"

"Jim."

Lem nodded and repeated slowly: "Jim. Jim—Humber."

"Humber," agreed the hostler in his husky voice. "Kids in Horn City generally tote the same name as their daddies, mostly. Good enough name I reckon."

And Lem thought dismally that it was. A damn sight better than Stewart, at any rate.

He moved wearily back to the doors. Three horsemen abreast plodded along the muddy street. The middle one was moaning and swaying in the saddle, and would have fallen had he not been supported by his companions. Vague slicker-hooded wraiths, they passed with melancholy sucking noises and were swallowed by the darkness.

The hostler was at Lem's shoulder, shuffling over the straw like a great soft-padded beast. "Strangers," he whispered huskily. "Comin' and goin'. Mostly goin' . . . ."

The note of warning was so strongly there that Lem stiffened, his hands sinking. Was the man grinning at him?

Then the hostler was leaning closer, his whisper sinking to a confidential hoarseness. "Whiskey's what a man needs a night like this. Now Jalspur's Central Bar, that's where they go, mostly."

Lem said, "Thanks," with an effort, and left, simulating the briskness of a man who needs a drink.

He had come fast and far. Three days he'd had on the hard-gaited dun, and Lem wasn't so young anymore. This time the weariness had struck deeper than his rheumatic bones. The dampness of the warm rain had come through his clothing. Somehow its tepidness had seeped into his spirit. There was the odor of death about this town. . . .Maybe, he thought, he did need a drink at that.

THE street was deserted. The walk clacked under the tread of his high-heeled boots. A hundred yards from the livery stable, he slipped into the slot between two buildings and circled back, plowing through the mud behind the livery stable corral.

Brad Humber's house was dark.

Lem knocked at the front door and waited. He had the feeling of eyes probing at him through the darkness. There was a trap here somewhere. Lem knew it. He sensed it with that indefinable wild-beast intuition which has kept more than one outlaw in the saddle long beyond his time. He raised the latch and pushed against the door. It opened quietly. He hesitated a moment, then with swift decision slid on through the doorway. There'd be no turning back now. He'd been in traps before; maybe he would be again. Gun in hand, he crouched with his back to the wall.

The room remained silent. And suddenly he knew, trap or not, he had entered an empty house. He holstered his gun and closed the door. He felt his way toward the kitchen, avoiding the furniture, but careless of noise.

A clock ticked on the shelf above the warm stove. Moist night air swirled in slowly under the two partly opened windows. He moved toward the gleam of a lamp chimney and struck a match. A note written in heavy pencil lay on the table beside the lamp and he bent over to read it.

Jim:

I will be back by ten. Stay out of town. If anything happens you can depend on Bund.

B. H.

He had time for a quick glance at the clock, and saw before the match burned to his fingers that it lacked five minutes to ten. He rolled a cigarette, lighted it. Pulling a chair against the wall, he sat there in the darkness, smoking and waiting.

Once, that odd sense of uneasiness prevailing, he glanced sharply toward the open window. Had something moved out there—or was it his imagination? One hand tightened about the butt of his gun, then he shrugged and relaxed his grip, deliberately burned the cigarette in a long white cone.

He had the feeling now that he was caught in a drift of events which was inevitable. Whatever the outcome, the whole dark pattern of his life must have been pointed toward the moment ahead of him—a meeting with the man whom he hated as only one of the Wild Stewarts could hate a Humber.

The Wild Stewarts. . . .

It was a long time since he had heard that name. A long time since the Humbers and Stewarts had faced each other through the haze of gunsmoke. And a still farther cry back to that July morning when old Daniel Stewart and Cephus Humber had raised the curtain on the red saga of the Humber-Stewart feud.

Ceph Humber had walked away from that meeting with three bullets in his barrel chest. Black Dan Stewart, gambler and gunman, never lived to see his enemy die.

But Ceph died just the same—and others after him—Stewarts and Humbers taking to their graves, one after the other. And later, numerous outsiders joined the slow procession so that, in the end, Black Dan Stewart and tawny-bearded Ceph Humber, leading the way down the Shadow Trail, had been followed by the shades of all manner of men. And finally when the last of the Wild Stewarts had married Dorinda Humber, the state governor himself, it was rumored, had taken a drink to celebrate the end of the feud.

Lem Stewart, sitting there now in Brad Humber's kitchen, smiled thinly, won-

dered if maybe the governor hadn't been several years too early with his drink. Then he thought of Dorinda Humber, of her grave steady eyes and her soft mouth —and he felt the old familiar tightening in chest and throat. He drew his hand across his eyes slowly, trying to untangle the memories of that long-ago night when Dorinda Humber died. . . .

He could still hear the old doctor's rumbling, slightly impatient: "I tell you, son, it ain't a question of money. Nor any kind of doctors—east or west—no matter how much money you got to pay for 'em."

Lem Stewart—young Lem Stewart in those days—stood there, stubborn in his incomprehension that the three thousand dollars outside in his saddlebags could not revoke the finality of the old medico's judgment. He couldn't believe it. He *wouldn't* believe that presently he must lose the one person in all the world who had faith in him, who loved him.

Then at last came realization, and the doctor's slow, pitying shake of his head. "I'm sorry, son. . . ."

Dorinda Humber's golden hair was falling across the pillow, the death shadows already at her cheeks . . . There had been her twisted smile and gently reproving: "Lem, Lem . . . . " as the slow tears squeezed out between his lids.

"It's all right, Lem," she had whispered. "Don't feel bad. *He's* the one that matters now," and she had touched the tiny, week-old morsel of life by her side. "Our son, Lem. Look—he's smiling! Promise, Lem —whatever happens—he'll never have—to be ashamed—of his—name. . . ."

Dorinda Humber died then.

And there was young Lem Stewart with that useless three thousand dollars and a stalled stagecoach somewhere in the night behind, and perhaps a posse already on his trail.

What matter the reason he had held up the stage? What matter to the Law how golden Dorinda Humber's hair, how blue her eyes, how soft her mouth? Lem had taken a desperate chance in hope of saving her life, and had lost. Dorinda Humber was dead. And young Lem Stewart, last of the Wild Stewarts—branded forever outlaw and road-agent —was left with a son who must never be ashamed of his name. . . .

## CHAPTER TWO

### Feudists Reunion

AND here was Lem Stewart twenty years later, waiting in the dark, speaking again to Dorinda Humber: "Don't worry, Dorinda," he said softly. "He'll never know. I'm bad, but I ain't forgot my promise. 'Jim' is what Brad calls him. That's our boy's name, Dorinda—Jim Humber."

Jim Humber. . . . Lem could still see Brad Humber standing there in the doorway of his cabin as he had one April twilight, twenty years ago. Brad Humber's father and mother had been killed by a Stewart, and his youngest and favorite sister had run off with the last of the accursed breed. Brad Humber stood there, stony-faced, with Lem's and Dorinda's son cradled in his arm.

Lem could still hear the hate-freighted voice of Brad's: "I'll take him, Lem, because he's Dorinda's. I'll raise him and give him an honest name—" Then Brad's voice broke hoarsely as he passed final sentence— "And before God, Lem Stewart, you'll never try to see him again! So long as he lives he'll never know that a damned black-hearted Stewart is his father!"

Remembering that, Lem's mouth creased in bitter lines. Well, it had been the only way; there were no regrets. Step by step he had followed the career of Brad

Humber across the country, hating the man, yet exulting in each fresh triumph that notched his reputation higher and higher in the epic of the West's great lawmen.

Deputy Sheriff Brad Humber. . . . . Marshal Humber of Lodestock, of Harneyville . . . . The Humber who cleaned up Hellways . . . . High Sheriff Brad Humber of Horn county. . . .

Lem Stewart—outlaw and killer . . . . Twenty years of eating his heart out along the dark trails. Twenty years of cold camps on the hillsides while he watched the warm lights in valley ranches blink out one by one—alone with his memories of a slim, golden-haired girl he'd never see again, a son he must never claim. . . .

He shook his head slowly. No, there were no regrets. You played the cards that were dealt and when the last chip was gone, the board was clean. Humber was a name to be proud of. Not like being branded a Stewart—one of the Wild Stewarts.

THE cigarette glowed again, and held steady as Lem heard the front door open, heard footsteps in the front room and a heavy voice saying: "You in the kitchen! I know you're there, so listen careful. There's a man outside with a scatter-gun on you through the window. Now get up slow and light the lamp. And—don't drop your cigarette!"

Lem shot a swift glance at the window again and climbed wearily to his feet. The cigarette, a glowing bead in the darkness, described his deliberate progress toward the table. A muffled exclamation sounded behind him as the lamp flickered then bloomed in soft yellow flame.

Lem turned and nodded sardonically at the glinting law-badge behind the leveled muzzle of Brad Humber's gun.

"If I was gunning for you, Brad," he asked coldly, "would it be in the dark?"

Brad Humber stood motionless in the doorway, staring. Older now than Lem remembered, hair grizzled slightly at the edges. Beyond that he was unchanged; deep-chested, short-coupled and powerful, as weighty and unyielding as a block of granite.

The Humbers were like that, Lem thought bitterly, unchanging, unyielding and unforgiving. He snapped out the match and waited, smiling bleakly.

Brad put up his gun slowly, hooked his thumbs in his belt. "So-o," he mummured, "it's you, is it?" His neck corded, voice breaking hoarsely: "God!" he cried. "Lem Stewart! And I'd hoped you were dead!"

Abruptly he swung his broad back and strode to the window. "All right, Bund," he called to someone outside. "I can handle this." He closed the windows and drew the shades.

When he faced Lem again his square, heavy features were expressionless: "I should have been looking for you, Lem," he said stonily. "Wolves run in packs. I forgot that."

"Meaning Jalspur?" Lem shook his head. "I run in no pack of his. I've heard about him, though. I know he's out to gun-rod this valley and he's got the men and the brains. You're in a tight, Brad. Jalspur's got a hole all ready for you in boothill, and he's sent for—"

The lawman's rock features cracked derisively. "You tell it scary, Lem," he cut in. "Now I'll tell a scarier one—for you and Nick Jalspur. You go back to Nick and tell him to start digging again. Tell him that other hole's filled. I filled it myself—tonight—when three of his gunies jumped me."

Lem's mind flashed back to the three slickered riders he had seen passing the livery stable.

Watching him, Brad's mirthless grin widened. Then his manner changed:

"Lem, what did you come for?" he rasped. "Not to tell me something I already know. You aren't that much of a fool—or are you?"

There was cold distrust in Brad's voice now. His eyes were hard and bright as chips of blue chalcedony, drilling into Lem the conviction that his cause was hopeless.

"Maybe," Lem mused softly, "I'm even a bigger fool than you think. The Humbers always were bull-headed — that's something *I* forgot. Did you know, Brad, that Jalspur has sent for Harry Cracken? That maybe he's in Horn City right now?"

"Cracken!" Brad clipped the word contemptuously. "A cross-draw man! I've heard of him—a tall skinny jasper with a big fancy-mounted gun."

"And whatever you've heard about Harry Cracken and that fancy iron of his, you better believe," Lem said soberly. "Nobody ever heard of him till a year ago, when he damn near wiped out Caldwell single-handed. Listen, Brad." The little outlaw leaned forward, desperately in earnest: "The Stewarts never raised cowards no more than the Humbers. Whatever else you may think of me, you know that. Well, I seen Harry Cracken's cross-draw once — and I went cold all over! Does that mean anything?"

It didn't. Brad Humber was the Law, contemptuous alike of gunslicks and death. "Who sent you, Lem?" he demanded harshly. "Nick Jalspur? Trying to scare me out? *You* know me better than that! What's your game, Lem?"

Sullen hatred, twenty years smouldering, whipped to flame. Then Lem was away from the table like the sudden release of an over-tensed spring. "I'm no friend of yours, Brad Humber," he cried thickly, "nor ever will be! Get yourself killed for a bunch of grubbing nesters, and be damned to you! Let Jalspur burn out the valley for all I care. But get the boy out of here before he gets killed too!"

"So it's the boy you're worrying about? I was waiting for that. Make a pact with the devil or a Stewart and you'll live to regret it. Whose boy, Lem? Not *yours!* The boy is a Humber—and Humbers don't run!"

The little outlaw's sultry gaze locked with the lawman's chill stare. Then it faltered as the fire went out of him. He looked down at his thin, wiry gunman's fingers, flexed and unflexed them, said drearily: "You've got my son, Brad. There's not much left. No man ever saw a Stewart on his knees. Do you want that too?"

"My son, Lem—not yours. Twenty years ago you gave your word you'd never try to see him again. I'm holding you to it. You've had your say. I've had mine. Now get out."

A boot scraped outside on the kitchen stoop. A draft from the quickly opened door set the lamp to flickering, sent a long tremor down Lem's spine.

He knew who had entered the room; knew it was his own son standing behind him even before Brad raised one arm toward the front door and gritted at him: "Damn you, Lem—*get out!*"

Lem's feet were rooted. His head started to turn. He saw Brad's silent grimace — half snarl, half smile — as if Brad had long ago forseen this eventuality and prepared for it.

"Even a Stewart's word is no good anymore!" Lem thought miserably, and he swung fully around, facing the boy behind him.

Boy? Somehow he had forgotten in the slow shuffle of time that boyhood comes to manhood. Now he was conscious of a vague shock and bewilderment that the years had tricked him so. Young Jim Humber was a man—slim, straight and

proud as a lance, with the lean, keen features of the Stewarts.

Black Dan Stewart come back to life again; but without Black Dan's midnight hair, his sloe eyes and long, white gambler's hands. Young Jim Humber's hands were big and blunt-fingered, strong and brown. Honest hands. Humber hands.

Slow wonderment took possession of the little outlaw, then swelled to pride. This erect young fellow with the steady gray-blue eyes was his own flesh and blood—his and Dorinda's. His son! And just for a moment—was it only in his imagination?—the burning intensity of his gaze seemed to have kindled an answering warmth in those steady grave eyes. Then he heard Brad's harsh grating voice:

"It's a Stewart, son. The last killer left of the Wild Stewarts. You're a Humber, son. Look at him and hate his guts!"

And Lem saw the blue eyes chill, hard and unblinking. They were Humber eyes. All Brad Humber's implacable hate of the Stewarts showed in the tightening of young Jim's mouth, the clenching of his big brown hands. His son. . . .

Lem turned blindly, stumbling a little as he left the house. His bitterness was a scourge within him. There could only be one end to it all—a fitting inevitable finish to the Stewart-Humber feud.

He heard Brad in the doorway behind him, his voice curiously softened: "In God's name, man! Do you think I *enjoyed* that?"

Lem paused on the bottom step, sucking in the night air. It seemed that even his own words came painfully, as ripped by main strength from his soul. "Enjoyed it?" he queried finally. "I hadn't thought. Yes, I reckon you did enjoy it, Brad—anything to crucify a Stewart! I learned one thing, though; he's a man now. I'd forgot that. He don't need you no more, Brad."

"So-o. That's it, is it?"

"That's it, Brad," and Lem Stewart's voice was as cold as gray ice. "You can forget about Harry Cracken. There's another you've got to face first—the last killer of the Wild Stewarts. You named me yourself, Brad!"

Brad answered slowly: "I always figured it would come to a showdown between us sometime. Well, any time you feel lucky, Lem. . . ."

And Lem heard the door close.

THE rain had stopped and a lean, high-flying moon dodged among the breaking cloudbanks. A freshening breeze rustled in the cottonwoods, spattered warm drops through the darkness. The livery stable hostler was leaning against one of the gate posts before Brad Humber's house. He swung lazily at Lem's approach.

Lem noted the shotgun hooked under his arm and said flatly: "Your name's Bund. You tailed me here."

"Bund's what they call me—mostly," he acknowledged. I didn't tail you, though. I was waitin' for Brad when you come. I warned him you was inside. Mostly I do warn Brad when strangers ride in—two-gun strangers."

Lem remembered the note Brad had left on the kitchen table. Brad had told young Jim he could depend on Bund if anything happened. Lem wasn't so sure himself. He whipped a gun into the hostler's ribs.

"Hell! What's that for?" Bund protested. "I could have blowed your head off long ago if I'd been minded—when you was sittin' in the kitchen smokin'."

Lem bored in hard with the gun muzzle till the breath went out of Bund in an agonized wheeze. "Thinking of tailin' me now?" Lem asked.

"Maybe," Bund gasped. "Maybe not." He shook his head stubbornly. "Brad's a

friend of mine. And I ain't satisfied yet you ain't one of Jalspur's gunies."

Brad was right; for all the hostler's seeming flabbiness he was man-size. With Brad gone, he'd do to ride river with young Jim. Young Jim was a man grown, and Brad had served his usefulness. Brad could be edged out of the picture now. The shades of Black Dan and tawny-bearded Cephus waited, laying their grisley wagers. . . .

Lem's lips twitched in the ghost of a smile as he sheathed his weapon. "Don't bother tailing me," he told Bund. "I'm heading for Jalspur's Central Bar. Tell that to Brad. He's probably guessed it already."

Bund straightened and rubbed his bruised side. "Maybe," he said huskily, "I'll get to blow that black head of your'n off your shoulders yet."

"Maybe." Lem shrugged, stepped out on the plank walk, headed for town.

He looked back once. Bund was still leaning against the gate post, a motionless, formless bulk in the night shadows, his face a gray, eyeless mask.

## CHAPTER THREE

### A Notch for a Killer

YELLOW light from four dangling coal-oil lamps filtered down through suspended smoke planes. Six or seven hard-case gunmen sprawled at the tables; a lackadaisical poker game was going on; a gorilla-built bartender stood behind the counter. There were worse places aplenty than Jalspur's Central Bar, but never one where Lem had been struck so forcibly with the feeling of suppressed turbulence, a volcanic malignity pushed hard to the erupting point.

The barkeep's shrewd little eyes missed few tricks. "You been sick?" he growled.

Lem glanced in the mirror at his pale, drawn face, reached again for the bottle. "Just cold—I guess," he answered hoarsely.

"Cold! Tonight?" The barkeep shrugged. "Mebbe-so. I hadn't noticed it myself." His glance flicked to the two low-slung black butts. He picked up a glass and began polishing. "Now if I was a stranger in Horn City," he muttered reflectively, "and lookin' for a likely place to light. Why, I reckon *I'd* see the boss."

Lem shook his head wearily. "You got rooms over here? What I'm looking for is a bunk."

"See the boss." The barkeep jammed a stubby thumb toward a corner table. "That's him over there, Nick Jalspur. The one in the black coat and string tie with his chair against the wall like he's asleep."

Lem turned, following the direction of the barkeep's thumb. A man with a long snaky neck, his back to Lem, was leaning across the table speaking earnestly to Jalspur. Jalspur was listening, eyes closed, lips pressed in a thin pale line, face as reposeful and monotonously seamless as if carved from blue-veined marble.

Lem's eyes shone darkly for an instant. Then he set down the whisky glass carefully and smiled. He left the bar and took up a position behind the man with the long snaky neck. The man was Slip Hooker.

Jalspur's eyes slitted open alertly, closed. Slip's nasal whine persisted, all unaware of the little gunman at his back: "Nick, I tell you there must be some kind of a tie-up between him and Brad Humber. When I seen him on Squaw Saddle—"

"Is this Lem Stewart a little man? Dark?" Jalspur interrupted Slip suddenly.

"That's him," Slip nodded. "I thought you never seen him."

"I'm just remembering," Jalspur murmured dreamily. "Black eyes—looks like a killer, don't he?"

"Looks like one?" Slip shuddered. "Hell, he *is* one! If he ever knowed I come here and said anything to you about him and Brad—"

Lem's finger tips brushed the black gun butts. He folded his arms loosely, waiting for Slip to turn. A hush settled over the barroom, focused attention upon the corner table.

Jalspur's green eyes peered narrowly across Slip's shoulder, then satisfied there was no menace to himself his lips twitched in the suggestion of a smile. "I'm sorry, Slip," he mused, "but I don't think your information is worth anything. The tie-up between Lem Stewart and Brad, if there is one, is the old Humber-Stewart feud. And even if it wasn't, what possible interest could I have in a dead man?"

"Brad? Hell, he ain't dead yet!"

"Not yet, Slip. But you have no idea how I can smell out death. I can almost smell it now." Jalspur unveiled his green eyes. "In fact, Slip," he said gently, "I can almost see it ready to strike. Can't you, Slip?"

Slip shook his head admiringly. "God, Nick! You always was the cold one! You give me the horrors even worse than Lem Stewart." He poured himself a drink from the bottle on the table. "Some day," he muttered venemously, "me and that damn little killer is goin' to tangle. And when we do—"

Slip's voice choked off abruptly, aware for the first time of the strange stillness of the bar room, of the direction of Jalspur's intent gaze toward someone standing at his back. A tide of color washed across the back of Slip's neck and was gone. His hands dropped to his guns.

"Nick?" he whispered huskily. "Nick?"

Lem balanced his weight on the balls of his feet. "Turn around Slip," he said softly.

SLIP HOOKER seemed to contract, to shrink within himself. "Nick!" he cried in desperate appeal.

Jalspur's pale lips tilted at the corners. "Death, Slip. Do you smell it now?" He shook his head, his green eyes dancing.

The breath went out of Slip in a long gasp. He gathered his feet under him, pivoted slowly on the chair.

Lem waited with that odd, cold sense of detachment which was always present in these moments, for the timed instant when he would feel the springing thrust of life through his body, the culminating flash of action. As from a distance he observed Slip; the drained face, the slacking jaw, the fearful, watering eyes.

"Lem! Lissen, Lem—"

"I warned you, Slip. You've got a chance to make your play. Take it before that's gone, too!"

Slip's hands were shrinking from his guns as from red-hot metal. Then sudden desperate cunning gleamed in his eyes as his gaze fastened upon Lem's loosely crossed arms—the only bait Lem knew which would induce Slip to go for his guns. And watching, Lem knew the instant Slip made his wild resolve.

The chair spun behind Slip as he hurled himself forward. The chair on one leg, Slip on one leg, as there came the dual *snick* of steel across greased leather and the nearly simultaneous blast of the two guns.

Lem felt the tug at his shirt as Slip's slug slammed into the wall behind him. But Slip brought up short, and straightened as if a ramrod had been thrust the length of his spinal cord. Slip who had been almost fast enough, seemed to grow taller and taller, his jaws gaped silently. Slip strained till it seemed he must burst in the effort to release the scream locked somewhere inside him. . . .Then Lem's gun rocked in his hand again, twice, de-

liberately spaced, and Slip crashed to the floor.

The barkeep had not moved. In the back mirror Lem could see reflected the stark attitudes of the other hired gunmen, roused by the kill, but waiting the signal from Jalspur to unleash the savagery of their calling.

Both guns were in Lem's hands now. A dark, menacing little figure of a man, he crouched, calculating his chances.

Then came Jalspur's cool voice: "I can use a man like that. Put up your guns, Lem Stewart. Nobody loved Slip."

The barkeep, still staring, reached behind him mechanically for a bottle. A faintly audible sough of expelled breaths swept the barroom. Lem holstered his guns slowly; came rigid again as the batwing doors flew inward before the charging entrance of Sheriff Brad Humber.

Here and there about the barroom men rose to their feet, shifted their positions as Brad Humber bent over the contorted object which once had been Slip Hooker.

Jalspur's smile was fixed, cruel and without humor. "An even break, Sheriff," he said smoothly. "Slip forced the fight on this man. There's a dozen witnesses."

"A dozen murderers, you mean!" Brad retorted harshly. He straightened, and it was the measure of the lawman that wherever his gaze fell a man moved uncomfortably and averted his eyes. "You and you," he ordered suddenly. "Pack this over to the undertaker's."

Lem watched two of Jalspur's men carry out the remains of Slip Hooker. He saw through the briefly opened doors the broad face of Bund, the hostler, the tilted barrel of a shotgun.

Lem wondered if Brad knew how closely his faithful watchdog was following at his heels. Probably not. For Brad, he admitted with grudging admiration, could be as disdainful of aid as he was contemptuous of those who plotted his death.

"Tomorrow, Lem," Brad said in his cold, emotionless voice, "you be out of Horn City."

Jalspur slid forward, eyes glittering. "Hell, you can't do that! Sheriff, you listen to me. This man stays here as—"

Brad Humber's big hand swept out impatiently, brushing Jalspur aside, sending him over a chair and against the wall. Jalspur leaped to his feet with a snarl. Behind Brad three men slapped at their guns—thought better of it, and slowly elevated their hands.

The paunchy hostler stood in the doorway, shotgun leveled. "Hold it!" he ordered huskily. "S'help me, you hold it, Jalspur!"

Brad was boring at Lem with his stony eyes, seemingly oblivious to the interruption. "By noon tomorrow, Lem," he went on evenly, "when the blacksmith strikes the wagon tire. That's your deadline."

A faint smile touched the little outlaw's lips as he caught that old note of challenge. "At noon tomorrow, Brad," he said, "I'll take the middle of the street. I won't be hard to find."

"So you feel lucky?" Brad nodded. "I'd hoped that. I'll be looking for you, Lem." He turned on his heel and in company with Bund left the barroom.

Then Jalspur was at Lem's side, his voice a sleek purr: "You'll get him, Lem. Hell, man, he can't match *your* draw!"

Cool moisture glistened on Jalspur's marble face. There was a dankness about the man that was suddenly repellant. His supple fingers moved caressingly over Lem's shoulder. "You get Brad Humber out of the way and I'll have this valley in my pocket. It's big, you don't know how big it is. Maybe the key to half the state. I'm building long fences, Lem, and Nick Jalspur don't forget a friend. You

throw in with me and you'll never regret it." An almost fanatical gleam came into his green eyes. "Power, Lem!" he whispered hoarsely. "More power and money than you ever dreamed of!"

His hand slid under Lem's arm. "Val!" he cried to the beetle-browed barkeep, "Drinks on the house. Everybody! The best in stock. To Lem Stewart, here, the man that's going to notch Brad Humber!"

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Two Gunmen and a Girl

LATER, alone in one of the rooms Jalspur maintained over the bar for his gunies, Lem thought wryly that Jalspur was probably the first man ever to twist the Humber-Stewart feud to his own ends. Even so, it worked both ways. Here, once Jalspur was firmly in the saddle, Lem would be safe, with no more posses baying on his back-trail. Maybe sometime he could have a little spread of his own here in the valley—where he would be close to young Jim Humber.

Lem shook his head slowly, thinking of the price he must pay. For, with Brad out of the way, he knew Jalspur would have more work for his guns. Lem Stewart, hired gun-swift! Lem Stewart whose guns had never been for sale. . . .

Why not? All his life violence and bloodshed had pursued the little outlaw—or had he lived only for violence and bloodshed? What difference one sin more or less piled on those which already were legion? Wasn't Brad Humber only a hired killer, too?

Lem had seen it before: killer lawman and killer outlaw, their graves side by side, both unhonored and unsung. What could Brad hope for in the end? Nothing! Yet Brad would throw everything he had into the scales for these nesters and ranchers: his life and all he held dear. Was it possible that for all the lawman's stern, rock-like mold there lurked within him some inner fire, some tenuous vision that Lem Stewart could never comprehend?

The little outlaw shook his head again, wondering if here at last was the real secret of his hatred of Brad Humber.

He sat there at the window in the darkened room above Jalspur's bar, staring off across the hushed valley. Out there were oldsters who had come in their Overlands and lumbering Conestogas. Their sons and daughters who, in turn, were bringing more sons and daughters into the world. Home-builders kneading their lives into the bounteous breast of a new land—the eager, groping fingers of a young and lusty nation. All to be sacrificed to Nick Jalspur's power-mad ambitions.

Gray light was showing in the east when at last Lem rose from the chair by the window, flung himself across the creaking bed.

He awoke late, harsh sun-shafts glinting at the windows as he came down in the barroom again. An hour—two hours more and the old Humber-Stewart feud would have reached the end of its long, bloody trail. Wearily, Lem moved up to the bar. . . .

THE barkeep reached for a bottle and spoke to Lem from the corner of his mouth: "Harry Cracken come in this mornin'. He's back there in the office now with the boss."

Lem shuddered a little as the raw whisky hit his throat. He'd forgotten Harry Cracken and forgotten that his—Lem's—original mission coming to the valley had been to warn Brad against the great gunman.

The barkeep was grinning. "You plant Brad Humber today and you do Harry Cracken out of a thousand dollars. That was to be Harry's job. And 'cordin' to

reports he don't think no more of a thousand dollars than he does his right eye."

Lem was thinking how neatly the dark pattern was shaping to Jalspur's design: Brad Humber out of the way and a thousand dollars saved at one stroke. Or maybe Lem would be the one planted and Harry Cracken would have his thousand dollar job after all. Either way, Brad Humber and all he stood for was doomed.

Lem's hand went to the bottle again, the dismal certainty in his heart that no man ever would live who tried to match Harry Cracken's uncanny gun-speed.

The barkeep pointed with his thumb in answer to Lem's question. "Across the street—next to the saddle shop. That's where most of the boys eat. Old Man Cantwell's dead now and his kid, Mary, is runnin' the restaurant. A looker, too—Mary is." The barkeep's grin became a leer. "But don't get no fancy notions, fella. The boss has filed on *that* claim. Stand-offish, now, Mary is. Hates the boss worse'n poison and that's a fact. She'll come to time, though, when the boss gets around to it. Hell, she'd be a fool not to, with all the pretties he could buy her! 'Nother slug?"

Lem shook his head, pushed out of the barroom and plodded across the street. The restaurant was empty of customers. Lem straddled a stool at the counter and gave his order.

Brown curls clung damply to Mary Cantwell's flushed brow as she bent over the stove. Watching her, Lem felt the stir of that vague inner conflict which had troubled him the night before. There was something hauntingly familiar in the set of Mary Cantwell's slim shoulders, in the tilt of her softly molded chin, in the sure, clean grace of her movements. And above all, in the direct, level manner of her gaze which was a poignant reminder of another pair of eyes, grave and steady. . . .

Then she came with his order, her gaze faintly scornful now as it traveled to his sagging gun-belts, rested again upon his lean, dark features.

The little outlaw turned his head. He couldn't meet those clear, honest eyes. It was a mistake coming here. He knew it now. Better if he had waited in the barroom till the hour of his meeting with Brad Humber. Now he was remembering what the leering barkeep had said and all its implication.

He stared down at his place, sensing without direct consciousness the calm, deep strength of this brown-haired girl who faced the world so straightly; he was thinking of Nick Jalspur with his white ghoul's face, his green eyes ablaze with strange lights. . . .

Then Lem heard a familiar, shambling footstep, heard the door swing open, and felt a chill at his heart as if touched by a breath from the tombs. He raised his eyes slowly, lowered them again.

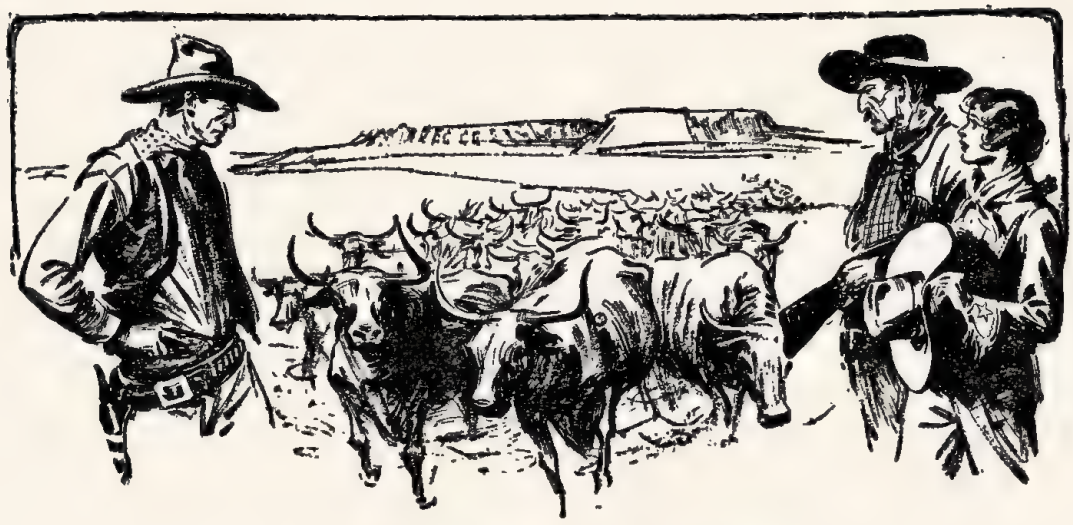
MARY CANTWELL moved to the front of the restaurant. Gunmen were an old story to Mary Cantwell, nor was fear any part of her make-up. Yet now she caught her breath sharply as she saw the tall, stooping figure of the newcomer, the cadaverous features under the low-crowned hat, the single white-handled gun which showed at the unbuttoned line of his long alpaca coat.

The man glanced at the apparently heedless little figure hunched on the stool at the far end of the counter and smiled faintly. He touched a bony hand to the brim of his hat as he turned to Mary Cantwell.

"I'm Harry Cracken," he announced in a low, singularly deep voice. "Maybe you've heard of me. Nick Jalspur sent me. He said you'd understand...."

She drew herself erect, eyes flashing. Mary Cantwell wasn't afraid—not for herself, she wasn't. "I've heard of you,"

*(Continued on page 149)*



# Up The Trail

NOT every battle of the cattle frontier was a bloody one, but without exception each called on the individual courage of the pioneers who faced new and dangerous situations in the great saga of early Western history. There was, for example, Joe McCoy, a stock dealer from the Midwest, who was one of the first to realize the future importance of a good shipping point for the Texas drives.

Abilene, later to be known as the daddy of the wild trail towns, was only a dot on the sweeping Kansas prairies at the time of McCoy's first visit. The Kansas Pacific had just reached there, however, and McCoy saw immediate possibilities of making of it a meeting place between Texas driver and shipper.

Little enough co-operation was McCoy offered by the railroad, but dauntlessly he went ahead, spending thousands of dollars of his own money, building up facilities for handling the stock he felt sure would come.

But the drivers had been bitten before by organized gangs of trail wolves. They were slow to respond, and even when they did, there were still other difficulties.

Those lay in the increasing enmity of the growing hordes of nesters toward the drovers. No dirt farmer had more than a few cows or oxen nor more than a few acres of land under cultivation, yet they realized the menace offered by the sharp hoofs of the oncoming herds. With shotguns, they set up an impassable deadline.

McCoy, as well as some of the wiser trail-drivers, knew that this would bring ruin to them all unless those cows could get to market. At the point of desperation, now, they decided upon a plan.

Early the next morning, to the surprise of the nesters, the drovers made no attempt to move their cattle. Instead, they made the rounds of all the farms, buying up at exhorbitant prices all the farm produce on hand, from steers to fresh eggs. The farmers now saw that by prohibiting passage to the cattle they also would be cutting their own throats; the deadline was removed, and McCoy's ambition was assured of fulfillment.

To Joe McCoy, a pioneer, little known outside of his own adopted town, goes much of the glory which made Abilene one of the most colorful and roaring towns of the great cattle trails—a frontier village whose name will live forever in the annals of the West.

*(Continued from page 147)*

she said witheringly. "Harry Cracken, a killer and a murderer. So now Nick Jalspur gets a murderer to do his courting for him, does he? A *murderer!*"

Her scornful laugh flicked at the gaunt killer like the coil of a lash. "Does Nick Jalspur think he can frighten me into marrying him?" she demanded. Then she shook her head wonderingly, a simple sincerity in her manner that some might doubt. "Doesn't he know," she said quietly, "that I would kill myself first?"

Milky, red-rimmed eyes peered at her from cavernous sockets and a hint of admiration crept into the gunman's deep voice: "I expect you would at that, ma'am," he answered slowly. "Just the same it would be foolish. That way—two would be dead."

"Two?" She stared at him uncomprehending.

Harry Cracken inclined his head gravely. "That's the way of it, ma'am, unless maybe you see it clear to change your mind. Nick Jalspur don't like rivals—not in anything. Mostly they have bad luck."

"Rivals—?" she repeated uncertainly. "You mean Jim? You mean he'll have bad luck unless I marry—?" Her eyes were suddenly enormous in her pale face.

Harry Cracken turned, giving a twitch to his coat as if he were suddenly cold. "Till nine o'clock tomorrow morning," he spoke over his shoulder. "Nick said he would wait that long for his answer."

Mary Cantwill stood motionless, watching the door close behind the tall, shambling gunman. Then she was around to the end of the counter in a quick swirl of skirts. "Wait! Oh, wait! Harry Cracken! Harry—"

A man barred her way. She tried to brush past him. "Get out of the way!" she cried in a low, tense voice. "They're going to kill him! They'll kill Jim Humber!"

*(Continued on page 150)*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*(Continued from page 149)*

"No, ma'am. I don't think they will. Take it easy, ma'am." The insistence and cool assurance in the words checked her, gave her a grip on herself. She was aware now that the man confronting her was the little gunman who had been sitting at the far end of the counter.

She stared at him blankly. A lean, hard-bitten little man whose features were drawn in lines of unutterable weariness, whose eyes, as she gazed into them, were dark wells of loneliness.

For the moment he seemed to have forgotten her, to be lost in the preoccupation of his own somber thoughts. "So it's Jim Humber, is it?" she heard him murmur. "He's the next on Harry's list. I ought to have known that. Maybe I did know it. Maybe I guessed it way back there on Squaw Saddle."

He nodded as if settling a conviction. "Yes, ma'am," he said, speaking directly to her. "I reckon I did know it—all along."

He reached out in a slow, timid gesture, pointing at the diamond on her finger. "That's his ring, ain't it?" he asked huskily. "Jim Humber's? It's a right pretty ring, ma'am. This Jim Humber, now—he must be a fine, upstanding young fellow. I hope you'll be happy, ma'am."

There was color in the girl's cheeks now, breath coming fast between parted lips as she felt the stirring of some vague, warm remembrance. "Just now—the way you looked!" she said tensely. "I've seen you before, somewhere. I know it. Who are you?"

He shook his head. "No, ma'am. You've never seen me before. I'm what you called Harry Cracken—a murderer, a killer. A *killer,* ma'am!" And so burning were his eyes, so bleak and cold his face, that the girl started back with an involuntary shudder.

The little gunman swung about abrupt-

ly and moved to the door. He paused there and when he turned again she saw he was smiling; a smile that Mary Cantwell was always to remember as the strangest, and somehow the most terrible she had ever seen.

"Don't worry, ma'am," he called softly. "They won't kill your Jim."

Through the window she could see him crossing the muddy street, heading with short, absurdly bowlegged strides toward Jalspur's Central Bar.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Gunsmoke Pledge

THE low murmur of many voices greeted Lem as he pushed through the batwing doors. The barroom had been filled since earlier in the morning. Gunmen and nondescript hangers-on, drawn by news of the impending gunfight between the sheriff and the little stranger, lounged at the bar, grouped at the tables, staring at Lem with speculative eyes.

The barkeep smirked and nodded. "Five minues yet, fella." He jerked his head at one of the men by the bar. "Jim there was just up the street. Brad Humber's in his office now, oilin' his irons, I reckon. Some of the boys were bettin' you pulled outa town. But I told 'em—'Hell,' I says, 'any time that little gent—'"

"Where's Nick Jalspur and Harry Cracken?"

"Hey? Why, back in the boss's office. Harry just went—"

Lem plowed ahead, eyes upon the door of Jalspur's office. The blurred bank of faces wavered, divided for his passage, rolled back before him. He heard the mutter of Jalspur's voice behind the heavy-panelled door, and the deeper, organ-like tones of Harry Cracken. He raised the latch and opened the door.

Harry Cracken, his long bony frame

*(Continued on page 152)*

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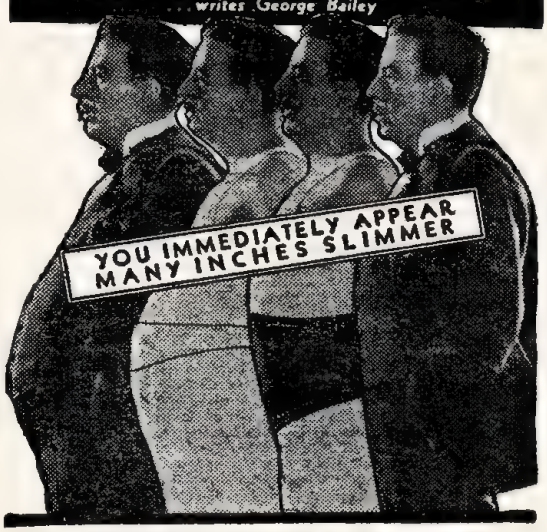


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*(Continued from page 151)*

sprawled in a chair at the far corner of the office, glanced up and nodded. "Ah, Lem. I saw you once before this morning. In the restaurant. You didn't see me. Maybe you didn't want to see me."

"Maybe," said Lem, "I didn't." He closed the door. Behind his back, his fingers found the bolt and he shoved it home.

Nick Jalspur, seated at the desk in the corner of the office opposite Harry Cracken, was frowning. Harry shot him a lightning glance.

There was another man in the room—Bud Noyes, one of Jalspur's gun-guards. A huge, gorilla-bodied man who looked enough like the barkeep to be his brother. He had one heavy thigh hooked over a corner of Jalspur's desk. He was scowling at Lem.

Lem moved toward Jalspur's desk, hands dangling at his sides.

Bud straightened at his approach. "Ain't you never learned to knock afore you come bustin' into a room thisaway?" he growled menacingly. "If you—"

"Shut up, Bud!" Jalspur cut him off abruptly. He leaned forward, green eyes narrowed. "What did you come here for, Lem?" he demanded sharply. "Do you know what time it is?"

Lem nodded. "Close to twelve. In a minute or two Brad Humber will be on the street gunning for me. Is it worrying you, Nick? It ain't worrying me." He came on, smiling gently. "I got a message for you, Nick. It's from Mary Cantwell."

"Ah—Mary Cantwell." Jalspur's brow was suddenly smooth again, pale and gleaming with its faint moisture. "What is it, Lem?" he asked huskily." What did she say?"

"Listen!" Lem held up his hand for silence.

From the far end of town came the clanging tattoo of the blacksmith's ham-

mer on the suspended wagon tire. Twelve o'clock! Brad Humber would be coming out of his office now, guns ready, looking for the last of the Wild Stewarts. Brad Humber, flint hard, implacable....

Lem reached for the whisky bottle on Jalspur's desk. "One drink, Nick. The last one. To Brad Humber—and the end of the Humber-Stewart feud."

"Damn the Humber-Stewart feud!" snarled Jalspur. "I want that message. Quick, man! What did the girl say?"

"So you want your message, eh? Well, lean close, Nick. Closer. Here's Mary Cantwell's answer, you—*rotten polecat!*" And Lem swung the bottle full into Jalspur's glistening face.

There was a crack of glass and spurt of liquor; a flash of Jalspur going over backward in his chair.

THE LITTLE outlaw's laugh spun crazily through the stunned silence. He dived forward, hands streaking to his guns.

Bud Noyes, both hands on his guns, started stupidly at Nick Jalspur, on the floor, one leg pointing stiffly toward the ceiling. Harry Cracken tensed forward, eyes cavernous, taut skin drawn back from his teeth like a grinning death's-head.

Lem's guns were already clearing leather when he saw the darting flicker of Harry Cracken's fleshless hand, an orange sun-burst blossoming at Harry Cracken's thigh. High sound rocked the room, Lem's gun jumping and echoing Harry Cracken's. A tremendous weight hit Lem on the left side, lifting him clear of the floor, crashing him down on Nick Jalspur.

Outside in the barroom someone was shouting. Feet were pounding along the passage-way. Jalspur's scream keened above the uproar: "My eyes! Oh, God! My eyes. . . ."

*(Continued on page 154)*

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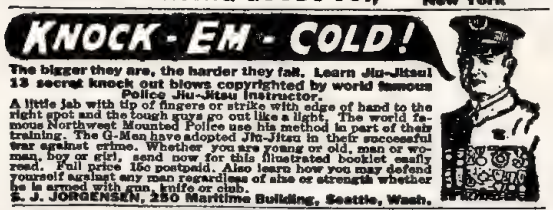
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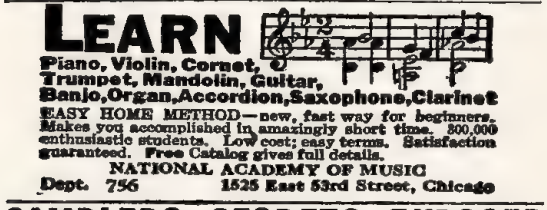
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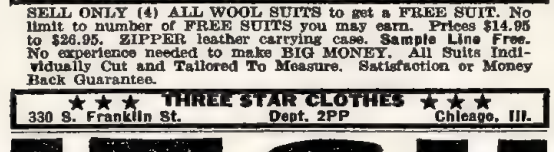
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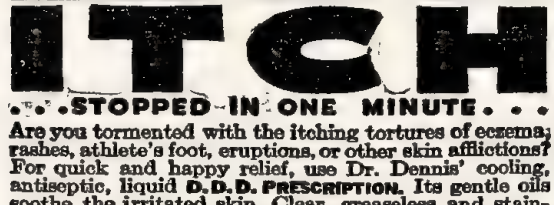
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*(Continued from page 153)*

Lem's left arm was useless, his gun under the desk. He clawed his way up again. His remaining gun thundered twice before he could believe his incredible good fortune. Harry Cracken was standing by the chair empty-handed, his white-handled gun on the floor ten feet away. The great gunman who never before had felt lead had been hit by Lem's first shot. And he was going down now.

Men were in the passage-way, pounding on the locked door. Lem sprang sidewise, whirling to face Bud Noyes. Searing flame stabbed at the little gunman. He snapped a desperate shot in return and knew dismally that he had missed.

Bud, the big gunslinger, had had time to get set. Both guns were out, sweeping Lem half across the office with their bellowing blast.

Lem staggered, hearing rather than feeling the slug that smashed into his already numbed shoulder. A bullet scorched along his side. Another, striking deeper, like the twist of a knife, sent him to the floor. He heard Bud's howl of triumph: "He's only got one gun! Take him, Nick! Take him!"

Long lines of fire laced through the mushrooming smoke. The rolling concussion of guns filled the office.

Lem came to his knees, then crumpled again as a slug took him in the thigh. Slivers kicked up in his face. He rolled along the floor, vaguely conscious that at last his own gun was answering Bud's.

Bud had him, and Bud knew it. He could see Bud's face snarling through the reeking haze, advancing, retreating to vast distances, then disappearing altogether, his guns unaccountably silent.

Lem propped himself on one elbow, waiting. He peered with fogging vision toward where Jalspur had lain beside the overturned chair. He didn't care about Bud. Bud didn't matter. Jalspur was the

one he had to kill. Jalspur wanted Mary Cantwell—Mary Cantwell, who was slender and proud like Dorinda Humber, who loved his son and Dorinda's. . . .

"Jalspur," Lem cried hoarsely, "You yellow livered snake—show yourself!"

He turned his head swiftly as he heard a croaking laugh. But it was only Harry Cracken. Somehow the gaunt killer had managed to pull himself to a sitting posture against the wall.

Then he saw Bud reel to his feet from behind the desk. Bud's face was a mass of blood, but there was a single, long-barrelled gun held in both hands—swinging in blind circles.

Lem threw down on him savagely for the finishing shot. The hammer merely clicked. . . .

"AH, LEM, your gun empty?" The jeering voice cleared Lem's brain, his vision. He saw now that Bud was on his back on the floor, a slow crimson trickle seeping from his temple. Bud was finished. It wasn't Bud who was standing by the desk. It was Jalspur, Nick Jalspur, with the blood streaming down his face from the broken whisky bottle. Nick Jalspur, very sure of himself now, holding the long-barrelled gun negligently while he wiped his blood-clogged eyes.

Lem dropped his useless gun. His despairing gaze cast about the office: Bud Noyes, a gross lifeless hulk—Harry Cracken with his ghastly, tooth-bristling grin, his gun gone, his great gunman's hands empty and powerless.

Jalspur was moving away from the desk. "That whisky bottle," he purred softly, "that was a bad mistake, Lem. They squeal when they're gut-shot. Did you ever hear a gut-shot man, Lem?"

Sweat trembled on the little gunman's livid brow, his breath suddenly sharp and rasping as he became aware that something hard and sharp-edged was

*(Continued on page 156)*

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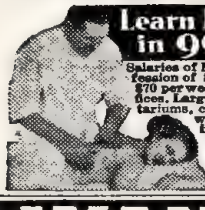

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*(Continued from page 155)*

gouging into his spine. He rolled partly on his side and felt beneath him with his one good arm, his fingers desperate, searching. . . .

Jalspur was gliding toward him with feline softness, eyes glinting like pools of green venom. "Squirm, Lem," he mocked. "That's it. Harder, Lem. You'll be squirming in hell before long. You'll be—Damn you, Lem Stewart!"

All the suppressed virus and evil of the man suddenly ripped to the surface, gagging him, twisting his gory features in a transport of incarnadine fury. "Get ready, Lem!" he choked.

Then Lem's groping fingers found the metallic object that had been gouging into his spine—curled about the checked and curved handle of Harry Cracken's .44.

He saw Jalspur raising his long-barrelled gun and saw him stiffen in utter disbelief as Lem's hand flashed into view.

The guns roared.

Lem felt the drive of a red-hot poker into his groin and heard his own gasping cry. He whipped up his head again in time to see Jalspur spreading his arms like a swan diver, balancing—toppling—plunging straight into the thundering threnody of Harry Cracken's .44—clasped now in Lem's lean fist. Four bullets marched Indian file up the front of Jalspur's shirt—then Jalspur's body hit the floor, twisted and was still, arms outflung, a curling tendril rising from the blackened muzzle of his gun.

SMOKE swirled and lifted through the silent office, coiled in vaporous tentacles about the head of the staring little gunman. As from afar he heard Harry Cracken's hoarse chuckle.

"It's a good gun, Lem. Now let's see Nicky find the buttons for *them* buttonholes!"

Lem sighed and dropped the empty gun.

## HIS GUARDIAN—THE KILLER!

Harry Cracken coughed, peered at Lem with owlish concentration. "I expect you're a goner, too, Lem. You're leaking bad. Now me—I just feel lazy and comfortable like I'd et a good dinner. I'll be remembering you, Lem—" He chuckled again and paused to clear his throat.

When Lem finally looked, Harry Cracken was bent far forward, head touching knees, gouts of blood welling from his open mouth.

Long since the pounding at the locked door had ceased. Now from the barroom Lem heard Brad Humber's stentorian voice raised in command. Someone was in the passage-way. The bolt disappeared in a blast of slivers and the door slammed open. Then the paunchy hostler was in the office, smoking scatter-gun hooked under his arm.

Lem, rigidly propped on his elbow, murmured: "If it's me you're gunning for, Bund, I reckon you can save your shells."

"Yeah," Bund agreed huskily, "I reckon I can." The scatter-gun slipped through his fingers till the butt quietly touched the floor. His eyes were staring, his face grayer than ever—growing grayer in the fading light. "God!" he said suddenly. "Oh, my God!"

The passage-way was filling. Lem watched gravely as men crowded the open doorway, their white-blotched faces pressing close through the encircling gloom.

Then someone was at his side: "Lem! Can you hear me, Lem?"

"I hear you, Brad." Lem tried to focus his dimming gaze. "Sorry, Brad," he whispered. "Couldn't meet you at twelve. They were going to kill—him. Understand, Brad? Jim. They were—going—kill him."

The pain was gone now, only a slow numbness crept up from his thighs. Lem closed his eyes, gathering strength. "I—kept my—word. Promise, Brad, Jim

*(Concluded on page 159)*


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***that helps you***

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# Kidneys must *clean* acids from your *blood*

DR. W. R. GEORGE
*Former Health Commissioner of Indianapolis*

# Your System is Poisoned

## And May Cause Getting Up Nights, Nervousness, Leg Pains, and a Run-Down Condition When Kidneys Function Poorly

Your health, vitality and energy are extremely dependent upon the proper functioning of your kidneys. This is easy to understand when you learn that each kidney, although only the size of your clenched fist, contains 4½ million, tiny, delicate tubes or filters. Your blood circulates through these tiny filters 200 times an hour, night and day. Nature provides this method of removing acids, poisons, and toxins from your blood.

### Causes Many Ills

Dr. Walter R. George, many years Health Commissioner of Indianapolis, recently stated: "Most people do not realize this, but the kidneys probably are the most remarkable organs in the entire human anatomy. Their work is just as important and just as vital to good health as the work of the heart. As Health Commissioner of the City of Indianapolis for many years and as medical director for a large insurance company, I have had opportunity to observe that a surprisingly high percentage of people are devitalized, rundown, nervous, tired, and worn-out because of poorly functioning kidneys."

If your kidneys slow down and do not function properly and fail to remove approximately 3 pints of Acids, Poisons, and liquids from your blood every 24 hours, then there is a gradual accumulation of these Acids and Wastes, and slowly, but surely, your system becomes poisoned, making you feel old before your time, rundown and worn out.

Many other troublesome and painful symptoms may be caused by poorly functioning kidneys, such as Getting Up Nights, Nervousness, Leg Pains, Dizziness, Frequent Headaches and Colds, Rheumatic Pains, Swollen Joints, Circles Under Eyes, Backaches, Loss of Vitality, Burning, Itching, Smarting and Acidity.

### Help Kidneys Doctors' Way

Druggists and doctors in over thirty-five countries throughout the world think that the proper way to help kidney functions is with the modern, up-to-date Doctor's prescription, Cystex, because it is scientifically prepared in strict accordance with the United States and British Pharmacopoeia to act directly on the kidneys as a diuretic. For instance, Dr. T. J. Rastelli, famous surgeon and scientist of London, says: "Cystex is one of the finest remedies I have ever known in my medical practice. Any doctor will recommend it for its definite benefit in the treatment of many functional kidney and bladder disorders. It is safe and harmless."

And Dr. T. A. Ellis, of Toronto, Canada, has stated: "Cystex' influence in aiding the treatment of sluggish kidney and bladder functions can not be over-estimated." And Dr. C. Z. Rendelle, of San Francisco, said: "I can truthfully recommend the use of Cystex," while Dr. N. G. Giannini, widely known Italian physician, stated: "I have found men and women of middle age particularly grateful for the benefits received from such medication. A feeling of many years lifted off one's age often follows the fine effects of Cystex."

### Guaranteed 8-Day Test

If you suffer from any of the conditions mentioned in this article or feel rundown, worn out, and old before your time, poorly functioning kidneys may be the real cause of your trouble. And because Cystex has given successful results in thousands of cases throughout the world after other things had failed, you should put this doctor's prescription to the test immediately, with the understanding that it must prove satisfactory in every way within 8 days, or you merely return the empty package and the full purchase price is refunded.

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**Dime Detective Magazine**

*(Continued from page 157)*

never—know. Never be—ashamed—"

Brad's answer was a long time coming. It sounded husky, like Bund talking: "I promise," Brad said.

Lem let his head fall back against Brad's arm. Sometimes Brad was hard to hate. Brad was big. Lem wasn't.

Lem was just a little man, and tired—desperately tired. He could feel the numbness creeping higher, like slipping into a cool, shadowed pool—higher, higher. . . .

The little gunman's head stirred in the crook of Brad Humber's arm. He smiled lazily, and that was all.

Brad rose stiffly to his feet. Someone sighed. "A bad 'un," a man said. "Them kind always die hard."

Brad's cold eyes swept the crowded office, picking out the townsmen, nesters, ranchers, everyone whose life was inextricably bound up in the future of the valley. And not one understood their sheriff's reply.

"Sometimes," Brad said quietly. "It's only their badness that dies."

* * *

The tide of empire rolls on. Brad Humber still lives. A grandfather now, a strange softness—tolerance perhaps—has come to his harsh features with the passing years.

Nick Jalspur, Harry Cracken, Bud Noyes and Lem Stewart—their names are undecipherable on the slightly askew, weathered pine slabs that mark their graves; their infamies forgotten in the turbulence of the past.

Four bad men—yet somewhere amid the welter of their sins someone must have found one small morsel of virtue. For upon one of the pine slabs, deep notched as if the anonymous carver were defying weather and time alike, is this simple tribute:

He Kept His Word

**THE END**


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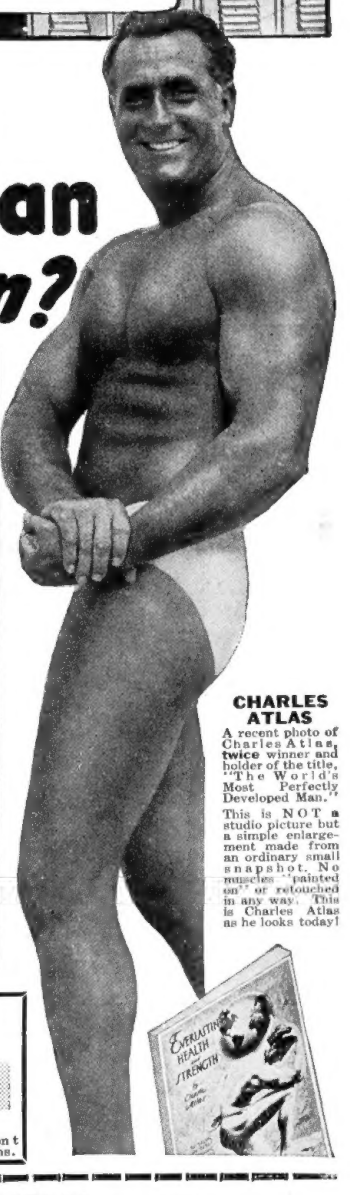

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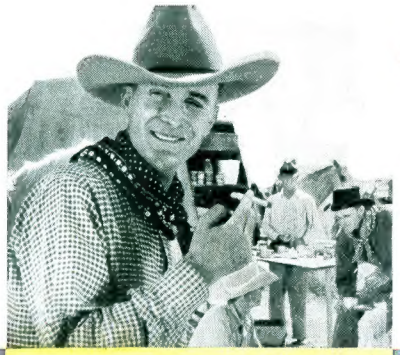

# "For Digestion's Sake Smoke Camels!"

## "MIGHTY GOOD ADVICE," SAYS THIS HARD-RIDING TEXAS COW PUNCHER

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**"AFTER RIDING HERD** from sun-up to sun-down, the chuck-wagon looks mighty good to me," says Fred McDaniel *(above, also right)*. "But I wouldn't enjoy my 'chuck' half as much without the pleasure I get from smoking Camels with my meals and afterwards. After a good meal and Camels I feel plenty O. K. Camels set me right! And they never get on my nerves."

**COSTLIER TOBACCOS**

**Camels are made from finer, MORE EXPENSIVE TOBACCOS ...Turkish and Domestic... than any other popular brand.**

**Smoking Camels, you enjoy a sense of greater ease while you're eating, and afterwards too!**

WHAT Fred McDaniel says about Camels is backed up 100% by baseball's "Iron Man," Lou Gehrig—by Frank Buck, of "Bring 'Em Back Alive" fame—by Eleanor Tennant, outstanding woman tennis coach of the U. S.—and by millions of other Camel smokers in all walks of life. Enjoy Camels at every meal. They speed up the flow of digestive fluids. Increase alkalinity. Help you *enjoy* food. Camels set you right! They're *the* cigarette for steady smoking. Light up a Camel any time and get an invigorating "lift."

**BUSY SECRETARY.** "I smoke Camels," says attractive Joselyn Libby. "Camels put more fun into eating and smoking too. So many girls smoke Camels."